



## Chapter 8

# Strategic Communication

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Through their foreign policies, strategies, and the implementation thereof, governments attempt to persuade a person, persons, or organizations of interest (National Security audiences) to behave in ways that are conducive to their National Security goals. Governments use many tools of persuasion to do this, from coercion to diplomacy, to sanctions, development, communications, and other activities. Usually, more than one activity is used at a time, and multiple segments of a National Security audience are targeted. Strategic communication is more than the “standard” communications usually associated with governmental public affairs, public diplomacy, international broadcasting, and information operations, for example. Strategic communication is how you integrate foreign audience understanding to develop and manage persuasive foreign policies, strategies, and implementation plans.

The goal is ultimately to persuade foreign leaders or populations to change their behavior. To do so successfully with effective tools, the government must understand how the audience perceives the world and the government’s actions; what their attitudes are towards the behavior change the government is seeking; and how those attitudes have been formed. It is not so much the action itself, or how well it is performed, but how they are perceived in the mind of the intended audience that matters—so words and actions must be gauged to be effective there. If they are not, the goal will

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likely not be reached. Strategic communication is about managing these perceptions.

Strategic communication as used in the formulation of the Marshall Plan to counter communism in post-World War II Europe is an excellent example of its successful application to National Security. The approach crafted by the U.S. policymakers was to appeal for European reconstruction and create confidence in their current forms of government, and not just to stop the spread of Communism, or promote U.S. power and interests. Lack of effective strategic communication was evident in the conclusion of the Versailles Treaty which ended World War I and laid the foundational causes of World War II.

Unlike discussions on more traditional governmental roles such as military force, intelligence, and international aid et al., strategic communication is not now a core competency of the U.S. government. This absence greatly hinders the development of this capability. Education and understanding inside the government are the keys to improving U.S. strategic communication.

There are three steps the United States could take now to improve this capability in the government. These measures do not require new legislation to adjust authorities; they are not expensive; and they do not require building new bureaucracies or entities.

1. **Senior leadership education:** Strategic communication is a top down capability—if it is not working at the top, it probably cannot be fixed from the bottom up. Senior leadership in the National Security policymaking arena must have a strong conceptual understanding of strategic communication. A major first step to implement this conceptual understanding and to provide senior leadership with the tools to oversee how strategic communication is designed and implemented, would be a focused two-day course/workshop with a defined curriculum on what strategic communication is and how it must be integrated into policies and implementation. This can be done by use of case studies and tabletop exercises that highlight how the use of strategic communication can make or break policies and their execution. Initial efforts, such as the State Department's Foreign Service Institute Marketing College, can be built upon to provide this training.
2. **Create a culture of strategic communication:** The United States government needs to create a culture within its National Security operational ranks of what strategic communication is, the important role it plays, and how it affects everyone's mission. Just creating additional tools or programs alone will not enhance our capability sufficiently, as it often takes just a few negatives to offset many positives. To illustrate, the United States Navy faced a similar problem in the 1980s when it was dealing with

a severe safety issue within its aviation community. Many attempts were made to improve procedures, training, equipment, and other approaches to fix the serious losses of aircraft and aircrew. They had little overall effect. Then the Navy instituted a strong safety culture program which altered the way safety was treated, placed new emphasis on it, and introduced Operational Risk Management procedures. These steps had a dramatic effect on the way the culture of safety was treated within the Navy. Within a few short years, major accident-free deployments became the norm. This type of approach is needed to shift the culture of strategic communication within the government to enhance its capability and prevent “accidents,” or negatives.

- 3. Build an audience understanding capability:** In order to persuade foreigners of concern to us to change their behavior and attitudes, the United States must understand how they think about and perceive the priority issues we desire change in, and how our actions affect those perceptions. Again, it is not so much the action or its accomplishment, but how it is perceived that matters. Many believe that this “audience understanding capability” means that we should appease the audience by doing what they want. To get them to change, however, we need to know how to reach them in ways that they care about, and in ways that will resonate with them. The more you know about how someone you want to persuade thinks and perceives, the higher the chance of successfully persuading them—it’s not about appeasement. This is not as difficult as it seems. The most robust industry that has expertise and information in this area at present is in the market research community. We need to capitalize on this knowledge and expertise to create a center of excellence to support United States government agencies and departments to meet this critical need.

## Introduction

The probability for success of any national security policy and its implementation is critically reliant on Strategic Communication best practices. Brilliant examples such as the strategic communication-driven Marshall Plan, and private businesses such as Google and Facebook, highlight both the level of success that can be achieved, and how lack of use would likely have meant failure. The use of Strategic Communication best practices and the associated thought process provides the ability to deal with new, decentralized issues as well as traditional, centralized ones. The United States government currently faces great challenges in both the culture and capability of strategic communication. This has come about over time for a variety of reasons

including legislative actions, policy decisions, and loss of expertise—coupled with the dramatic changes caused by the impact of advances in global communications. Reestablishing the thought process and best practices in the environment created by new global communications will be an effective, even critical, capability needed to face the challenges of a rapidly shifting world.

Understanding how strategic communication can achieve this goal, and how the United States can develop the ability to use strategic communication effectively, requires first examining the factors that are preventing a new way of thinking, and then understanding both what strategic communication is, and what capabilities are needed to enable it. Most importantly, it is critical to understand the central role of strategic communication in policy and its execution.

Foreign policy sets approaches and goals for how a country interacts with external entities in furtherance of national interests. In essence, the implementation of these policies depends on persuading an individual, multiple persons, governments, or other organizations (national security audiences) to behave in ways that are conducive to realizing the goals of the foreign policy. Governments create strategies and use many tools of persuasion to implement these policies, from various types and levels of coercion, to education, diplomacy, communications, assistance programs, and other means. In the United States, these governmental tools are organized by function and legal authorities within the executive branch; for example the Justice, Defense, and State departments, and agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development and the intelligence agencies. In foreign policy, usually more than one tool is used at a time, and multiple national security audiences are targeted. To ensure, in the context of achieving policy goals, the most effective mix and use of these tools—as opposed to the most convenient, or the most efficient tactical or budgetary use from an individual department or agency point of view, the government must holistically understand how the goals, policies, words, and actions are perceived by and affect their national security audience. After all, the ultimate execution goal is audience behavior change—not efficient use of the tools—so words and actions must be gauged primarily for their persuasive effect in the mind of the audience. These national security audiences have different goal and issue perceptions driving their behavior, which is why you need the policy. Being effective means “walking in the audience’s shoes,” viewing through their perspective, and recognizing that this will be different. George Kennan, in discussing the European Recovery Program or Marshall Plan, recognized the primacy of this in shaping and implementing foreign policy. It was clear to him that the plan needed to be shaped around the “psychological effect,”

rather than purely economic considerations. “[I]t is essential that economic assistance be granted in such a way as to give the necessary psychological lift to the peoples in question.”<sup>1</sup>

This is perhaps the most brilliant and yet most misunderstood essence of the Marshall Plan. It also illustrates a vexing issue in foreign policy today. The idea that “what we need to solve problem x in country y is a new Marshall Plan” is often expressed. However, this new plan is most commonly understood as another “economic” plan to achieve a goal, rather than what the Marshall Plan really was—a carefully made plan to gain the necessary “psychological” effect that happened to be economic. In foreign policy execution today, we employ many of our tools in what we see as the most efficient manner within the budget constraints we have, rather than design a plan for the most effective “psychological” effect and then see how the tools apply. For example, the military may try to use their tools most efficiently to counter the violent threat of insurgents by focusing on the violence, rather than the more appropriate approach of using their tools to counter insurgents in such a way as to create the “psychological” conditions conducive to realizing policy goals.

**Strategic Communication is managing policy creation and implementation through the optic of audience perception to ensure effective persuasion.** It means using this optic to understand how to accomplish the mission, and how other tools integrate to create persuasive conditions conducive to the policy goal. Put more simply, if you want to persuade an audience to do something, it is easier and more likely to work if you know what their perspective is, what matters to them, and how they think and perceive so you can manage your efforts accordingly. This is not unlike the way a politician will spend large amounts of resources to understand an electoral base, and will shape subsequent actions and communications based on how it will affect that constituency and standing with colleagues. Private industry uses much the same approach for marketing and brand name protection. This culture, which is second nature in the above examples, is lacking in the foreign policy of the United States.

- Strategic Communication, as described above, is more than “standard” communications usually associated with governmental use—i.e., public affairs, public diplomacy, international broadcasting, and information operations. Although the written and spoken word is important, actions (or non-actions) speak louder. Coordinating words and actions across all the

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<sup>1</sup> George F. Kennan, “The Political Strategic Background of U.S. Aid Programs,” Memorandum, February 1948.

tools is vital, because, even though the U.S. government often sees the audience through several perspectives, depending on the specific agency or department, the audience only sees one entity and one voice—the United States. They do not see the difference between, nor understand, all the different agencies and departments with their individual goals and missions. It is a combination of the aggregate and salient impressions they get from all department and agency actions and words that affect their attitudes towards the United States, which ultimately informs and shapes their behavior.

- Strategic Communication is far more than just “not offending” an audience, or being culturally sensitive. The goal of Strategic Communication is proactive; it is effective persuasion. Although “offending” an audience can be detrimental to achieving the goal, the act of only “not offending” an audience will not achieve it. You must create conditions that make the audience both want, and be empowered, to take action and change behavior in a way conducive to national security goals.
- Strategic Communication does not mean appeasing an audience, or implementing the policy through “talking” or messaging. Strategic Communication means ensuring that the chosen policy and implementation will have the effect on the minds of the intended audience of changing their attitudes and behaviors in the way you desire and will achieve the desired end state. How you present your actions and how they are perceived is often as important as how well you perform them.
- Inherent in Strategic Communication is the fact that there are likely one or more forces with competing agendas, who are trying to persuade the same audience to behave differently. Strategic Communication accounts for understanding these efforts and how they impact your goals, policies, and strategies. It does not mean actively “countering” or denigrating the competing efforts, which may be counterproductive in many cases. How you react to them is a strategic decision that is dependent on understanding the situation and circumstances at hand.
- Strategic Communication is a top down process. It must begin at the top, and be included through policy formation, strategic planning, implementation, and measurement. If it isn’t structured right at the top and from the very beginning, it is very difficult to make it work or recover from a faulty approach later.
- Strategic Communication is not just used in “soft power” or “smart power.” Application of force or coercion must also be done in a way such that it will persuade the audience to change their behavior in a way con-

ductive to your goals. To adapt Kennan's idea—force must be applied to induce the necessary behavior change, or “psychological” effect. Application of force must also be done in coordination with other tools so that it is additive in nature on the desired effect, not one that cancels or negates the desired overall effect. For example, part of a policy to assist an emerging country may be to counter the violent tactics of the opposition. The way in which this is accomplished must be done from the optic of how it is perceived by the audience you wish to affect—which affects the way in which you accomplish it. Every situation is different depending on the goal, the culture, and the situation of the audience you wish to affect—there is no one standard counterinsurgency tactic that fits all situations. You must apply Strategic Communication best practices and optics to your situation to come up with the right approach.

- Strategic Communication is facing new challenges from media and technology advances that are changing the way society works. Large centralized organizations such as governments, militaries and industries—ones that run on chains of command where decisions are made and enforced by a few for the many—are being challenged by the emergence of decentralized organizations. These decentralized organizations are fueled by ideals and concepts, but have no central control. They often comprise many smaller groups operating independently, cohesively shaped by ideas and concepts. New media enhances the ability of ideals and concepts to spread and persuade, and technology allows smaller groups to exercise power that once only large, central organizations once enjoyed. Governmental Strategic Communication, in many cases, has to account now for understanding and persuading the decentralized “many,” rather than just the historic focus on understanding and persuading the “few” in charge of large centralized organizations.

There are many issues that inhibit the United States from using Strategic Communication effectively. They are not unique to the United States government. These same challenges face other nations and private industry as well. The most important issue for the United States in this regard lies within today's governmental cultural thought process. We need senior leadership understanding of, emphasis on, and application of Strategic Communication. As a government, we need a culture of thinking in a Strategic Communication framework and we need effective processes to develop Strategic Communication management.

Next in importance is learning how to deal with the growing challenge and power of decentralized organizations. The United States often tries to force such organizations to fit the mold of a centralized organization—going