

Strategic Communications in the Global Security Environment: StratCom's Shift of the Balance of Power

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Abstract

The public-facing aspect of national defence communications is a lesser understood organizational function of militaries around the world. Though conventional propaganda and diplomacy efforts date back centuries, the modern approach to military Strategic Communications (StratCom) is a murky, fast-evolving discipline that is not well understood by the public. As such, the topic bears further examination due to its vital importance in achieving defensive and strategic military objectives. Through defining StratCom's function and the contexts that led to its inception, this paper gives an overview of how StratCom has been useful for the U.S. and its Western allies in their navigation of a tense, nuclearized global security environment. Thereafter, through examining the new ways these strategies are employed in our hyper-connected world, this paper demonstrates that the West's adversaries have leveraged StratCom to tip the scales of hard power in the contemporary hybrid war environment.

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Introduction

Militaries around the world use StratCom as a vital tool for achieving strategic goals. Especially in the nuclear era, powers like the U.S. must be cautious with their employment of hard power—that is, conventional military tactics—to avoid sparking larger, devastating conflicts. StratCom is therefore an essential function of soft power, which can be understood as any tactical capabilities that may help achieve security goals without a material intervention. Major powers fine-tuned strategic communications tactics during the Cold War; particularly the U.S., who used broadcasting and diplomacy to influence public ideology and repeat messages of deterrence (Borg, 2008; Custer et al., 2022). Arguably, these soft power capabilities were undoubtedly strengthened by the hard power supremacy of the West. However, the rise of the internet, ubiquitous technology, and social media has shaken that status-quo; with modern StratCom nations, militaries, and militias of all sizes can now meaningfully influence global security, so long as they can distribute a compelling message. Although Western powers continue to exert great influence in the messaging ecosystem, the decentralized and fast-paced social media environment has arguably evened the playing field. What does this new strategic environment look like on the ground?

Literature Review: The Motivations and Methods of StratCom

It is difficult to pinpoint a discrete origin point for StratCom as it is currently understood. Some sources, like Custer et al. (2022), draw a direct line from modern StratCom to the U.S. government's messaging initiatives of the Cold War, which had the goal of influencing populations behind the Iron Curtain. Other sources (Althuis, 2021; Borg, 2008; Kacala, 2016)

cast StratCom as a novel development from the past 20 years, made prominent by the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

Regardless of its perceived era of origin, the general goal of StratCom remains the same: winning over the hearts and minds of relevant populations. As highlighted in the *2018 USSTRATCOM Public Affairs Communications Strategy*, external, public-facing communications form an incredibly important component of overall military strategy. In a brief forward for the document, General John E. Hyten writes that “without effective communication, you cannot drive change, get people on your side, or demonstrate ideas” (United States Strategic Command, 2018, p. 4). This statement, in addition to serving as an informal thesis for the document, illuminates the often-misunderstood role of StratCom in military contexts. Specifically, the document outlines that such communications—directed towards both domestic civilian audiences and to the international community—accomplish the goals of building public trust, sustaining support, most interestingly, deterring adversarial action (2018, p. 1). These observations may be heartening for a communications undergraduate student justifying their major of choice to skeptical family members. But why exactly does the U.S. military, in such unambiguous terms, view public relations initiatives as such a crucial role in global security?

Kacala (2016) sees StratCom as an inevitable result of the societal and technological contexts that contemporary warfare occurs in. These contexts are “characterized by a high degree of complexity and unprecedented multidimensionality,” ultimately creating a phenomenon called “hybrid war” (Kacala, 2016, p. 32). Therefore, Kacala posits that StratCom’s effectiveness lies in its ability to address intersecting political, economic, and social variables nimbly via the use of targeted communications, which influence specific audiences. But this capability was not developed passively. Though the U.S. military had gotten quite comfortable with StratCom initiatives during the Cold War, such endeavours were no longer a priority once the Iron Curtain fell, leading to a rapid decline in funding (Custer et al., 2022). It was in 2004 the Defence Science Board stated that public communication was “in crisis” due to the complicated dynamics of the war on terror (Borg, 2008, p. vii). Resultingly, StratCom was identified as one of five key areas requiring the U.S. Department of Defence (DoD)’s focused efforts, on account of the increasing degree to which conflict “takes place in a population’s cognitive space, making sheer military might a lesser priority for victory in the Information Age” (Borg, 2008, p. vii). According to Borg, the DoD then began implementing a StratCom strategy in earnest in 2006.

As highlighted by Kacala (2016), the modern approach to StratCom is a largely novel approach for militaries across the globe. Borg (2008) expands on this by identifying how the vastly different media context of the GWOT complicated the evolution of StratCom (p. 10). During the Cold War, strategic messaging was largely carried out via public broadcasting and diplomacy (Custer et al., 2022). But during the GWOT, StratCom must occur over (and account for) a very different informational environment defined by “continuous real-time information proliferation: twenty-four-hour news cycles spurred on by advanced information and communication technologies” (Borg, 2008, p. 2). As such, Borg illuminates that the modern communications environment has created more opportunities for information-driven soft power to undermine material hard power.

This is especially useful in today’s world, where multiple regional powers are in possession of nuclear weapons, and, moreover, some of these powers seem to communicate different understandings of the conventionally embraced Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)

doctrine. Specifically, Peters et al. (2018) identify that Russia, China, and North Korea—three adversarial nations who possess nuclear weapons—seem to exhibit a “theory of victory” doctrine regarding nuclear warfare (p. 21). In other words, these countries’ overall strategic directive embraces the potential first-use of nuclear weapons, countering the U.S.’s stance that such a war cannot be won and should never be fought (Peters et al., 2018). Many potential rationales for this attitude can be cited, but Peters et al., note that a primary justification for this nuclear-forward posture is to put strain on the U.S.’s military alliances, thus sowing uncertainty and discord within the global security community. StratCom, in addition to avoiding the hard power avenue, which could bear nuclear consequences, this serves as a counterbalance to these threats by allowing the U.S. and NATO to actively react to security situations, communicate policies and red lines clearly, and informationally reinforce their nuclear deterrence posture to whichever extent the situation calls for (Peters et al., 2018).

In terms of timing, Peters et al. (2018) writes from a perspective of legitimate nuclear threats only beginning to re-emerge from behind the Global War on Terror; but StratCom developments relating to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine seem to have vindicated their suggestions. Specifically, by repeatedly communicating their intel about Russia’s forthcoming invasion—despite skepticism from allies—the U.S. government made the Russian military’s operational environment “far more difficult than it would have otherwise been” (Huminski, 2023, p. 21). StratCom’s effectiveness and importance in this region is also substantiated by Kertysova et al. (2019), who identify that StratCom has helped enhance the European Union’s profile in Eastern Europe, thus creating a stronger defensive buffer against Russia.

Despite these apparent StratCom successes from the US and NATO, StratCom’s ability to counter hard power has proven to be a double-edged sword for the West. In fact, by proactively embracing new technologies and methods, adversaries like Russia, China, and even terrorist groups have unequally benefited from StratCom capabilities, allowing them to score notable victories on the battlefields of hybrid war.

StratCom in Enemy Hands

Extending their Soviet-era tradition of using information and propaganda to gain an edge, the Russian Federation’s approach to StratCom arguably forms the cornerstone of its entire military strategy. This can be seen with Russia’s nuclear doctrine as demonstrated above, but also with Russia’s conventional military forces, for which StratCom is utilized in the form of brash readiness exercises (Ratsiborynska et al., 2021). Like any military, Russia’s security posture benefits from gauging the fitness of their forces and equipment, but Ratsiborynska et al. state that the scale, advertisement, and geographic location of these exercises (notably the *Vostok* exercise in 2018 and the *Tsentr* exercise 2019) are all heavily determined by Russia’s messaging goals, both for internal and external audiences.

For external audiences, these exercises aimed to demonstrate that Russia’s conventional military was a credible, formidable threat on the world stage (Ratsiborynska et al., 2021). They also served as misdirection; the provocative scale and proximity of the exercises made it difficult to discern whether they were earnest preparations for war (Ratsiborynska et al., 2021, p. 10)—Russia would attempt to capitalize on this strategic ambiguity in 2022, when they repeatedly insisted their buildup on Ukraine’s borders was just an exercise.

For Russia's domestic audience, the exercises play an obvious propagandistic role, but also relay a more complicated message relating to Russia's supposed vulnerability to NATO and the West (Ratsiborynska et al. 2021). To Russian citizens, these exercises are not meant to be seen as brawny, aggressive displays; rather, they're portrayed as a necessary response to—and a hopeful signal against—a perceived ever-encroaching threat from the Western security apparatus (Ratsiborynska et al. 2021, p. 11). Of course, military exercises are a blunt instrument of communication; conveying such complicated narratives requires integrating other modern tactics, such as social media—a capability where the U.S. and its Western allies have demonstrably lagged its adversaries.

At the time of writing, Nissen (2015) illuminated that that social media's importance and relevance to StratCom was still a point of debate in NATO, and the effective adoption of it would require a "complete overhaul of NATO policy on social media" (p. 49). Meanwhile, Russia was proactive in its embrace of social media initiatives, identifying them as an effective way to carry out "asymmetric and hybrid warfare" (Szymański, 2017, p. 180). Using the cover of plausible deniability, Russia has used social media platforms to undermine the West through political trolling, spreading disinformation, falsifying facts, and flooding topic-related webspaces on a massive, coordinated scale. (Szymański, 2017, p. 180). In contrast to the West, this use of social media to "influence operations" was (and is) seen as vital to Russia's strategic goals that it is left in the hands of "senior officials, the best 'mission-oriented' staff from the Russian secret services, intellectuals, scientists, political scientists and the corps of patriotically-oriented journalists and culture activists" (Szymański, p. 181).

This level of care is also apparent in the way Russia communicates a cohesive 'strategic narrative' to its citizens and sympathizers through these activities. According to Nissen (2015), strategic narrative occurs when a StratCom effort communicates a cohesive, concise, and interwoven set of stories that appeal to desires at the root of a conflict. To manifest this, top Russian political strategists, like Alexander Dugin, have built a strategic narrative highlighting the "cultural struggle" between Russia and the West (Szymański, 2017, p. 180). Through the combination of military exercises and social media activity, one can see how StratCom plays a central role in Russia's hybrid war strategy.

Russia's activities show how StratCom can be used to conjure, insert, and reinforce a strategic narrative. China—another adversarial power that was quick to adopt social media—is an example of how strategic narrative can be achieved through suppression, specifically by way of their 'Great Firewall'. As identified in Schmitt's (2009) overview of social media in the military environment, the Great Firewall is described as a massive Chinese StratCom initiative that influences internal and external opinions by strictly regulating online activity and replacing Western social media platforms with Chinese alternatives. This shows that China was quick to recognize the influential value of social networks compared to nations like the U.S., and implemented hard-hitting, high-level policy to maximize its effectiveness largely before the West had even caught on.

Of course, Russia and China's StratCom successes may be attributed, at least in part, to their sheer size, their massive military spending (though both are still dwarfed by the U.S. alone), and their decades of resisting the West. Accordingly, to analyze modern StratCom as a scale-tipper against hard power, a better example is the success felt by insurgents and terrorist

groups who, over the past two decades, have shown that massive wallets are less meaningful in modern warfare.

Winter (2019) and Szymański (2017) illuminate the use of StratCom among radical Islamist terror groups, particularly about how it makes up for their hard power deficiencies. In fact, StratCom seems to be so crucial to their successes that it has become a tool of existential importance; Winter identifies that al-Qaeda's territorial contraction in 2015 directly correlated with net-decline in their communicative content (2019). For groups like this, messaging has such a high level of importance due to the intensely ideological nature of their struggle, which is dependent on sustained recruitment from specific audiences, purveying a sense of legitimacy around their cause, and intimidating adversaries (Winter 2019). To fulfill these objectives, Winter identifies that jihadi groups utilize a five-step model commonly employed in the corporate communications and marketing industries (p. 55). This simple and low-cost StratCom effort has paid great dividends for these terrorist groups, having helped the Islamic State to rapidly transform "from an ailing insurgency into a booming proto-state" (Winter, 2019, p. 57).

Like in Russia's example, another factor that contributed to the StratCom success of these Jihadi groups is their employment of strategic 'cross-media' narratives over social media (Szymański, 2017). Like how Jihadi groups lack the complex weaponry and funding of their adversaries, they also lack the backing of mainstream media sources. As a bulwark against this, a cross-media approach can take a single story or narrative and project it strategically across multiple social media platforms, ensuring that it is seen and reproduced among relevant audiences (Nissen, 2015). Through the organic virality and participation that results from this approach, one can easily see how groups like the Islamic State were able to spread their messaging like wildfire and become a formidable opponent to the West.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, the U.S. used StratCom to great effect to undermine a nuclear-armed adversary without setting off the powder keg. But with the fall of the Iron Curtain, it seems that the U.S.'s proactivity in this area has waned somewhat. Though the world's largest defence spender may still exert dominance in the information realm—the leadup to Russia's invasion of Ukraine being a great example—it is apparent that the U.S. spent much of the last twenty years on its backfoot with StratCom. This can clearly be seen in Russia's effective adoption of hybrid war StratCom tactics, China's careful moderation of internal and external discourse, and the frugal—yet effective—employment of social media 'cross-narratives' by Western-opposed insurgent groups. Since the landscapes of media, technology, and (especially) defensive maneuvering are fast-moving and obscure, it would be unfair to say that the U.S. has not caught up to its adversaries in the realm of StratCom. But with large-scale 'hot' conflict seemingly making a return to the global security landscape, the U.S. and the West should look at these recent decades as an important lesson. The ongoing maintenance and improvement of StratCom capabilities should remain a top priority for our nation's militaries as we wade further into a hyper-connected, post-truth world.

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