



Conference Proceedings

Air Power and Strategic Communications

NATO Challenges for the Future

JAPCC Joint Air & Space Power
Conference 2015



Joint Air Power
Competence Centre

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to this year's Conference and for making it a great success.*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Joachim Wundrak".

Joachim Wundrak

Lieutenant General, DEU AF
Executive Director

Conference Proceedings



General Gorenc, the JAPCC Director, opened with insightful comments on the importance of Strategic Communications.

Introduction

The 2015 Joint Air Power Competence Centre (JAPCC) Conference was held between 23 and 25 November in Essen, Germany. It explored the broad themes of Strategic Communications with specific regard to NATO air power. It considered whether NATO's air power capabilities and messages were well understood and were being adequately conveyed to a variety of key audiences including western publics, defence and finance government officials and NATO ambassadors. JAPCC's intention is to combine the views espoused at the Conference with the results of a related, ongoing academic study in order to provide NATO's strategic leadership with fresh ideas on how this key area might be improved upon.

These Proceedings consolidate the key note address, the panel discussions and attendee contributions to form a summary reference of the event and to offer points for future consideration and development. The document does not record the minutes of the Conference; rather, it highlights the major themes and draws together thoughts and ideas from all elements of the Conference. For a fuller understanding of the topic, readers are encouraged to read these Proceedings in conjunction with the previously published Conference Read Ahead material, which laid out relevant background information on the broad conference themes. It was an excellent Conference, with a wide range of participants including senior military leaders, NATO policy staff, current and former media, defence industry officials and staff from 23 different nations all contributing to this complex and challenging area.

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The Harsh Realities of the Contemporary Strategic Context

The Conference began by considering the current geo-strategic landscape and the numerous security challenges that NATO's military forces face whilst concurrently contending with budgetary pressures and occasional lack of support from the 'war weary' public. These pose particular issues for air power which, despite its astonishing speed, reach, precision and reactivity, remains a costly and often poorly understood component of NATO's self-defence capabilities.

Whilst air power practitioners and enthusiasts are fully conversant with its strengths and widespread utility, others often are not. This can include large portions of the Alliance's publics and, indeed, senior governmental decision-makers. The capital acquisition cost of air assets is undeniably high and often this is the only prism through which air power's cost effectiveness is considered.



The pace and extent of change within NATO in recent years has been incredible. This change continues to occur across a broad swathe of key areas. Today's overall geo-political landscape is markedly different to that which we saw in early 2014: DAESH has brought brutal acts of terror to North Africa and Europe; the Ebola virus represented a massive natural attack within Africa; and Putin's resurgent Russia invaded the Crimea. Concurrently, fiscal changes are unpredictable and have an immediate and dramatic impact on NATO's ability to generate and deploy air power.

Against this backdrop, the need for effective Strategic Communications is greater than ever. The view was expressed that air power advocates use a lexicon which is not readily understood by those outside the day to day air power arena. Would an average member of the public in a typical NATO capital city really know what was meant by phrases such as 'delivering precision kinetic effect'? There was widespread support for the notion that we need to simplify the language we use to describe what military air power can – and, importantly, cannot – do.

Real Threats, Real Challenges

The Conference was briefed on the arc of instability across North Africa and the Middle East and heard how DAESH has a strategy which, no matter how misguided or brutal we believe it to be, they are 'on time, on track' to deliver. Regardless of the abhorrence of their beliefs and associated actions, in terms of messaging to their own followers and to their sworn enemies in the west, Strategic Communications appears to be something they do well. Similarly, Putin's expansionist activities and operations in Ukraine pose a massive challenge to NATO. Again, however, his Strategic Communications efforts are impressive. Each and every action is well choreographed and simple messages (albeit false messages, such as NATO's hostile intent) are clearly understood and are promulgated extremely effectively via a variety of mechanisms to a very broad audience.



By way of a harsh reminder about ongoing instability in Iraq and Syria, mid-morning on Day 1 of the Conference saw news of the Turkish shoot down of a Russian fighter jet break. Tellingly, the first 2 attendees to receive the news and leave the auditorium for a few minutes were a 4-Star senior military commander and SHAPE's Chief of Strategic Communications! This event and international reactions to it proved to be a fascinating case study for some Strategic Communications considerations which were debated over the remainder of the event. One factor regarding operational issues which was highlighted repeatedly during the conference was that, even though NATO's desire to establish full facts before reacting to an event was understandable, perhaps more should be done to reinforce standing high-level messages. We are a coalition which represents the protection of democratic good. We uphold the highest moral standards and have absolute respect for international law and human rights. We are 'the good guys' and we should not shy away from articulating such messages time and time again, at all levels.

Panel 1: Strategic Communications and Air Power



The opening Panel discussion of the Conference considered the relationship between Strategic Communications and air power. Issues such as the adequacy of current NATO doctrine, the degree of optimization of current NATO resourcing and staff structures for Strategic Communications and lessons from recent conflicts were all considered in a wide-ranging discussion session.

There was broad consensus that

‘strategy’ and ‘Strategic Communications’ are inextricably linked. If a commander at any level is struggling to get his Strategic Communications sorted to his satisfaction, he or she would be well advised to revisit his strategy!

‘It’s Easy but it’s Hard!!’

Several panel one members expressed the view that Strategic Communications is a hard thing to accurately pin down and define, as it means subtly different things in different nations. The idea was put forward that Strategic Communications is all about coordinating, coalescing, and synergizing information with the aim of enhancing the message one is trying to convey. It is very much a human activity, with humans involved at both ends of the communication transaction. Thus, to do it well, one must consider the psychology of both message transmitters and receivers. Again, the point was highlighted that both DAESH and Russia do this activity well. Some considered that NATO’s policy and doctrine are inadequate and that, structurally, NATO’s HQs are not optimally configured for Strategic Communications purposes. Whilst strategic communication is not ‘public affairs on steroids’ and nor is it ‘psyops’, it nonetheless has interfaces and parallels with such activities and relevant staffs should be collocated (both near to each

other and near their commander) if the overall effect NATO is seeking to achieve is to be optimized. Contrasts were drawn with industry, where communications staff, lobbyists and marketing staff are frequently collocated and work together well. Industry was also viewed as being better than NATO at creating simple, readily understood messages for staff at all levels that can be easily communicated to both internal and external audiences.

The notion of 'telling a story' was repeatedly referenced. NATO's narrative should be confident and strong, explaining clearly 'good' from 'bad' and 'right' from 'wrong'. In order for this narrative to be powerful and compelling, humanizing the 'story' with confident, competent and trustworthy spokespersons matters. Visual images are powerful and often tell the required story without words. In conveying fast-moving events, the need to admit mistakes openly and honestly was reinforced, as was the need to build a relationship of trust with the audience. The view was expressed that in Gulf War One, General Norman Schwarzkopf was very successful at establishing trust with both media and the viewing public. However, if NATO's narrative is to be believed by its target audiences, it must sustain (or, some argued, attain and retain) its credibility. This frequently referred-to theme was considered further during the conference's final discussion and is reported on later in these proceedings.

When considering NATO's approach to Strategic Communications and its development of associated doctrine, it was highlighted that NATO moves very slowly. Despite policy having been agreed at the very highest level in 2009 (with only 11 of the 28 partner nations expressing an active interest), NATO has yet to fully implement the findings. In this time, the real world has moved on! NATO has failed to grasp fully the power of social media. There is a marked variation in risk appetite between nations and, indeed, sometimes between different armed services within the same nation (e.g. the US Marine Corps view versus the US Air Force view) with regard to social media and its use by active servicemen and women. Several participants (including some former journalists) expressed the opinion that those on the frontline should be allowed to use Facebook, Twitter or blogs

to explain what they are doing in action. This approach obviously creates communications security challenges for commanders and, equally, there is a risk that some within the operational arena may overstep the mark in terms of operational content. On balance however, many conference participants took the view that the potential benefits of telling stories about well trained, well-motivated youngsters doing fantastic, noble work in challenging circumstances were highly valuable and the benefits of such an approach would outweigh the associated risks.

Panel 2: The Media and Perspectives on NATO Air Power



Conference attendees were united in the belief that it is perceptions that matter. In attempting to shape public perceptions and, perhaps, perceptions of senior political decision-makers, the media is a key conduit via which such shaping activities can be effected. The second session of the conference therefore considered the relationship between the military and the media with a view to considering how

NATO might best improve its media messaging. Several current and former senior media players from both print journalism and TV participated in a fascinating session during which certain key dynamics were drawn out.

The session began with some extremely thought provoking views on air power and how it is perceived. Arguably, it is the most under-resourced and over-used of NATO's military tools. Air power is invisible: the public sees the machinery but does not necessarily see or understand the pilots who are delivering military effect at the end of the kill chain. Air power is

often perceived as being great for ‘breaking things’ (the professional application of precision kinetic effect) but as having no discernible role for ‘making things’, such as peace. From a Strategic Communications perspective, this can and does place air power at a public relations disadvantage. To counter this, NATO must become more proactive in conveying ‘the air power message’.

‘Make Good Use of Peacetime’

It was highlighted that the nature of air operations is inherently ‘exciting’ for the public. It was, therefore, recommended that, when operational pressures allow, NATO’s air forces should be more forward-leaning and pro-active in terms of routine dialogue with key audiences such as the media, academia, think tanks and the public at large. More frequent air power conferences which open their doors to wider audiences and articulate the NATO air power narrative clearly, concisely and in a lexicon that is digestible by all would reap benefit in the longer term. Similarly, greater routine levels of dialogue with air and defence media (open days, familiarization flights, simulator rides) all play a crucial role in establishing a relationship with the press. The benefits of such a strong, open and honest relationship are, again, likely to bear fruit in the longer term.

In articulating NATO’s viewpoint, it was stressed that the person articulating the key Strategic Communications messages need not always be a senior communications official or a senior military leader. A human dimension to a story often adds to its traction with public audiences. Sometimes, the best person to speak may be comparatively junior. Commanders must be prepared to pass trust down the command chain. Similarly, when mistakes are made we should be both understanding with the junior member who made the mistake and quick to correct the mistake with the public, apologizing if necessary. Arrogant impressions that air power is the answer to everyone’s problems must be avoided. Air power will rarely, if ever, be the only factor in successful campaign resolution. By being fully transparent about what air can and cannot achieve

and admitting vulnerabilities when appropriate, NATO could actually enhance its credibility as an organization which is both honest and is one in which its nations can invest trust and confidence. When tragic accidents happen (as they sadly often will in the fog of operational pressures) and civilian casualties result, NATO must articulate its sincere sympathies and argue that no operation is risk free; sometimes the bigger picture demands that these risks must be taken.



The issue of perceived over-classification was debated at length. Whilst a blanket declassification might assist in providing the media with plenty of strong evidence of well-meaning, well-trained, well-led forces delivering precise military effects in the most demanding of circumstances, it is perhaps naïve to consider such an approach given the security sensitivities in many operational scenarios. Nonetheless, the broad notion of declassifying as much as and wherever possible remains a laudable goal. This approach would also assist with sustaining critical tempo in the ‘war of words’ – a war in which NATO too often plays a reactive rather than a proactive role.

At the heart of defining the importance of the relationship between air power and the media is the concept of information warfare. It was stressed that winning the information war is every bit as critical as winning the war

on the ground and the war in the air. As discussed previously, our enemies are often good at this. It is undeniable that NATO has access to the best air platforms in the world and that, in all air power's key roles, it is largely peerless. However, enemies have been quick to spot the asymmetric advantage that air power brings and have countered it by successful disinformation campaigns. By regular claims of indiscriminate bombing and widespread civilian casualties (backed up with doctored video footage), adversaries have managed to paint a false narrative which, crucially, some believe to be true. This has resulted in public outcry and, in many cases in Afghanistan, resulted in NATO changing its modus operandi to reduce its utilization of air power. In terms of overall effect, this enemy strategy has therefore been highly effective. Similarly, by articulating arguments (consistently and at all levels) about the unethical nature of Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS), our adversaries have successfully cast seeds of doubt into the debate about the use of such systems. They have managed to create a visceral sense of unfairness about the idea of bombing people and/or places from the opposite side of the world. Countering such views is difficult.

One recurring theme during this session of the Conference was the notion of 'story telling'. It was agreed that, for maximum impact, 'stories' should have a human dimension and should be told by those involved at the heart of them: interview the F16 pilot whose precision weaponry skills killed a bad guy but avoided all the good guys; interview the C130 loadmaster who dropped much needed humanitarian relief to starving children; interview the Reaper RPAS pilot to find out just how much care, attention and precision he invested in watching bad guys to build up a cast iron intelligence picture before any strike was considered.

The fact that Russia is good at carrying out President Putin's strategic communication is due, in part, to the seriousness with which they approach the topic and the quality (and quantity) of people involved in undertaking such activities. A view was expressed that Strategic Communications is an arena into which NATO all too often posts staff who have no background

experience and within 2 or 3 years, just as they are starting to become genuinely productive, they are moved on to other challenges. NATO thus never builds up a sustainable and critical mass of Strategic Communications experts. Given the criticality of 'winning is the information war', the wisdom of continuing with this approach was questioned. This links to potential dedicated new training courses for staff, which is addressed in the next section of these Proceedings.

It became clear during discussion that there are marked differences of approach to Strategic Communications between different partner nations within NATO. It was felt that greater horizontal connectivity between national Communications staffs would serve to bolster mutual understanding and help promote best practise. Of note, some air forces had been very forward leaning in recent years, with the Italian Air Force notably having established its own Strategic Communications division.

Panel 3: Air Power and Disinformation



In conducting a wider gap analysis of NATO air and space power issues, the JAPCC has identified Strategic Communications as being an area where levels of mutual understanding and NATO's air power messaging (by whom? to whom? and how?) could be improved. Research was, therefore, commissioned with a view to making recommendations for improvement. A formal tasking was placed

upon a distinguished team of academicians to consider, on a nation-by-nation basis, how NATO's public views air power and how its views are shaped by disinformation campaigns. Their findings were presented and debated during the third Conference session.

The academic methodology was to analyse a large body of media stories in USA, UK, France, Italy and Germany over the past 20 years and to empirically assess how public audiences in the partner nations view air power as well as how their opinions and perceptions have been shaped by any disinformation campaigns waged by NATO's adversaries.

The case study of public perceptions of air power in the US revealed a growing awareness of air power's precision. Though the relationship between the media and the military is a dynamic one, there is a far greater respect for the military and, specifically, air power, than was ever the case in the Vietnam era. Public and political support for US air power has been based on promises of accuracy and effectiveness without the arguments always having been crafted in terms of associated risks. The US public perception is of a complex military machinery which often appears to be too centralized and too slow to react to event reporting. Opinion polls show that the US public and their politicians are often perceived as requiring further education about the realities of war. Reiterating a discussion from earlier in the Conference, the point was made that air shows, open days and frequent media engagement on routine operational preparedness all would help fill this gap in understanding.

Different dynamics were found to apply to public perceptions within Europe. Indeed, there is no such thing as 'European public opinion'; opinions and perceptions vary considerably from nation to nation. Such perceptions are normally based on historical issues and often there is a degree of inertia to public opinion which makes it hard to shape and change. Factors which NATO must counter in articulating its views to a sometimes sceptical public include disinformation (for instance, the constant drip feed of Soviet and then Russian disinformation to German audiences over many years).

Academic findings from the UK country study reveal a strong sense of support for the military and for the RAF in particular. Surveys show that the public at large remains largely supportive and respectful of the air force

even if in recent years they have been engaged in deeply unpopular foreign interventions. The UK public appears to have differentiated between unpopular wars and those who are deployed to fight them. There remains a question mark over the UK public's views on RPAS. Some academics believe their employment poses some new questions about ethics and the behavioural aspects of remotely prosecuting targets. The notion of 'post heroic' wars, where troops or planes are not being led into danger by a conventional military commander, might heighten public scepticism about RPAS in future, as there is no longer a 'heroic' pilot who is putting his life on the line to engage an enemy.

There was broad academic agreement that public opinion is shaped by simple, clear narratives. Air power practitioners are often guilty of articulating their arguments in terms of air platforms rather than providing simple explanations of for what they are being used.

Panel 4: Preserving Credibility



In drawing together many of the ideas and themes discussed earlier, the Conference concluded with a session about 'Preserving Credibility'. The previous day's shoot down of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey was again used as an example of Strategic Communications. Messages (with which NATO may or may not agree) were undoubtedly being delivered on both sides of the incident. The point was stressed that Strategic

Communications is about always being on the front foot. In military parlance, regaining lost ground is always more militarily challenging than holding what one already has; Strategic Communications is about not losing ground in the first place.

Conference attendees were encouraged to consider the issue of preserving credibility from a historic academic perspective. Aristotle argued that credibility is based upon 3 pillars: logos (argument); pagos (passion); and ethos (moral authority). We are far more likely to rationalize than be rational. It is perceptions of what you heard, and from whom, which are important rather than what was said. You need to win the right to be heard. Different people will therefore be the 'right' person to convey credible messages at different times.

It was argued that NATO needs to improve its strategy/narrative on air power. It should develop a matrix of target audiences. We should consider mission command as internal Strategic Communications: the commander's clear intent should be cascaded clearly and precisely internally to all. As discussed previously, the issue of NATO's structures and doctrine for Strategic Communications was again debated – and again found to be wanting. There was a strong case put forward for junior and middle ranking officers to play an active role in communicating our messages. We need multiple, well trained messengers. In discharging this key activity lower down the rank chain than has previously been the case, NATO must accept that mistakes will sometimes occur; there must be an acknowledged acceptance of this risk, which is worth taking.

The issue of training of key staff to improve their communications competencies was again considered. It was argued that the criticality of winning the information war is now so fundamental that NATO should no longer rely on 'enthusiastic amateurs being parachuting into these roles for a couple of years and then leaving again'. In addition to new staff training, the idea of embedding journalists attracted much support. Recent operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan have shown this to be an extremely effective means of conveying the professionalism, bravery and leadership of our (often very young) military personnel. When framed against a backdrop of argument about NATO's absolute respect for international law, its strong and unique pedigree as a defensive coalition based on peaceful, democratic principles and an absolute respect for human rights, this should

help sell a message about being a ‘force for good’. By being open and honest with our publics, admitting mistakes when they occur, highlighting the dangerous and risky nature of our business, and being frank about what air power can and cannot deliver, NATO’s challenge of appearing ‘credible’ will be made much easier.

Conclusions

JAPCC’s pre-Conference hypothesis that NATO’s air power Strategic Communications and its approach to countering its adversary’s disinformation campaigns both require improvement were entirely borne out by this event. JAPCC’s ongoing academic study of the effects of air power disinformation in a variety of NATO nations will report shortly and will include specific recommendations regarding structural changes, training courses and embedding of journalists within military teams. However, in advance of these recommendations, it is worth summarizing (in no priority order) the key themes and ideas about which there was broad Conference consensus. These themes were:


- Strategy and Strategic Communications are inextricably linked; a problem with one signifies a problem with the other!
- Messages are more readily conveyed in story form; the power of ‘story telling’ with a human dimension:
 - Clear, concise simple messages.
 - Conveyed openly and honestly.
 - Consistent messages at all levels.
 - Go back to basics in arguing NATO’s case (we have right on our side, we have absolute respect for human rights, we comply fully with international law, we are proud to occupy the moral high ground).
- Treat the media as ‘neutral forces’
(i.e. not friendly but certainly not as the enemy)
 - Seek to foster a relationship of mutual trust and understanding with the media.
 - Declassify as much imagery as possible to meet the insatiable demand.

- ‘Use peacetime wisely’:
 - Be proactive in terms of media events.
(familiarization visits, simulator rides, etc.)
 - Air shows and open days have a crucial role to play in explaining air power to the public.
 - Take every opportunity to let senior government official see air power in action.
 - Trust juniors to play a role in communicating our messages.
(and accept that sometimes they might make mistakes)
- Reconfigure NATO’s HQ structures to place all ‘external communications’ staff (StratCom, PA, psyops) in close physical proximity to each and to their commander.
- Whilst acknowledging national variations, NATO should seek to achieve greater horizontal connectivity between Alliance national external communications staff with a view to identifying best practises.
- Enhance the power of social media and trust our junior personnel to tell their (often compelling) sides of the story.

The wide ranging nature of discussion and debate regarding NATO Strategic Communications with specific regard to air power at this conference was extremely worthwhile and immediate post event feedback from attendees suggests that the event had been a great success. The JAPCC Staff thanks all who participated in the 2015 Joint Air and Space Power Conference and looks forward to feedback and discussion via **contact@japcc.org** or a post on our social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter).





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The JAPCC invites you to attend the

2016 Air and Space Power Conference

from 4–6 October 2016, Messe Essen, Germany.

The conference theme is:

‘Preparing NATO for Joint Air Operations in a Degraded Environment’

We hope to see you there!



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