

Strategic Communication and the UK Integrated Approach: Developments, Communications and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes some of the recent developments that support the UK's Integrated Approach, with particular reference to strategic communication and influence. Communication not only relates to the UK's whole-of-government approach for national communication campaigns, but also to inter-agency co-operation for contingency and crisis operations in fragile and conflict-affected states. Central to all of these issues is the need for improved evaluation in order to support evidence-based decision making, evidence-based policy and evidence-based practice.

INTRODUCTION

The integrated approach refers to people from different institutions that are brought together at several levels to achieve common aims. An integrated approach recognises that no single government department holds a monopoly over responses to the challenges of fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and that by making best use of the broad range of knowledge, skills and assets of government departments, integrated efforts should be mutually reinforcing. The integrated approach is typified by a multi-disciplinary, multi-department approach to planning, execution and evaluation activities. One of the key aims for the integrated approach is a more effective use of resources to improve the impact of activities [1]. Previously referred to as the comprehensive approach, the UK now refers to the integrated approach in response to the improved interdependent activities that must take place in order to address war, conflict, security and 'upstream prevention' in FCAS.

Communications is pivotal to the UK's whole-of-government approach because at an ideological level its core application is to improve people's lives. One of the core areas of activity in the UK Cabinet Office's Communications Plan 2013/14 [2] is to *encourage changes in behaviour which benefit individuals and the public at large*. This 2013 plan is currently being updated and will be published in April 2014 as the Communications Plan 2014/15. Further to this, the National Security Council (NSC) has established a Directors of Communication Hub, which brings together the Directors of Communications for each government department to address priority strategic communication (StratCom) issues. Finally, at the working level, there are numerous communications working groups that have been established at the cross-government level to address country-specific or region-specific communications issues of geo-political importance to the UK. These working groups integrate individuals from different departments, and technical backgrounds wider than traditional media and communications (e.g. the behavioural and social sciences), to help improve the provision of expert advice and options for projects and activities. Therefore, it can be seen how government communication has embraced wider integration and contributes toward the integrated approach.

A small issue that requires clarification is the subtle difference in government terminology. In the UK, there exists both *whole-of-government* and *cross-government*. Whole-of-government refers to an approach whereby *all* government departments, arms length bodies and non-departmental public bodies are required to

contribute to a particular strategy. For example, the UK's Industrial Strategy is an example of a whole-of-government initiative. Cross-government refers to the partnering of a selected number of departments or organisations that does not require a whole-of-government approach. The term tri-department is also used, but is mainly used to describe the multi-disciplinary interactions of the Ministry of Defence (MOD), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Department of International Development (DFID). As major departments of state, these three departments contribute to the UK's Conflict Pool (CP) and the Stabilisation Unit (SU).

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

StratCom is a commonly recognised term among international business and government. There are numerous definitions of Government-related StratCom; for example, the UK NSC's definition of StratCom [3] has been stated as:

“The systematic and co-ordinated use of all means of communication to deliver UK national security objectives by influencing the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, groups and states”.

The UK MOD [4], in recognising and distilling the NSC definition, defines Defence-specific StratCom as:

“Advancing national interests by using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people”

By way of comparison, and in recognising that the majority of publications on StratCom emanate from the USA, the White House's National Framework for Strategic Communication clarified their ever-changing definitions of StratCom in stating that *“by ‘strategic communication(s)’ we refer to: (a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals”* [5]. Interestingly, the US Department of Defense recently dropped the term StratCom and replaced it with ‘Communication Synchronization’ [6]; and finally, the academic perspective has defined StratCom as *“the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfill its mission”* [7].

The use of the ‘narrative’ has become commonplace in modern media and communications; and narratives can be developed for strategic (geo-political), operational (national) and tactical (local) levels. For StratCom specifically, the development of a strategic narrative is pivotal as it creates the high-level context and understanding by which all subsequent communications is based upon at lower levels. The strategic narrative not only shapes StratCom, but all other physical activities conducted by government, allies, and coalition partners (e.g. the use and delivery of military capability, diplomatic effort, humanitarian aid, as well as stabilisation and development). In other words, the integrated approach enables government to match ‘words and deeds’. Therefore, one should be able to see that StratCom is not only part of the integrated approach, but it is also subject to the principles of integration as it relies on the co-ordination and synchronisation of whole-of-government communications capabilities, tools and techniques alongside other non-communication activities.

FUTURE CONFLICT

Dominant contemporary thinking suggests that the future character of war and conflict environment is changing. Increased population growth, increased urbanisation, and increased technological connectivity will produce conflict environments that will be Connected, Congested, Cluttered, Contested, and Constrained [8]. This implies that there will be a range of military, other government and inter-agency actors that will be present within these environments; all of which suggest profound impacts on synchronisation, co-operation, and integration as a whole.

In terms of the integrated approach, there are four useful concepts that the UK has developed. Firstly, for cross-government colleagues there is the **Conflict Foundation Course**, which is aimed at introducing government staff to topics such as theories of violence and conflict; conflict analysis tools; conflict assessment; and terminology and definitions. The two-day introductory course is aimed at bringing MOD, FCO and DFID colleagues together in order to improve and unify a common understanding of modern conflict. Further to this course there are additional courses and exercises that appropriate cross-government colleagues can attend, such as the conflict practitioner's course and Exercise CIVIL BRIDGE.

Secondly, the **civil service stabilisation cadre**¹ is a group of more than 190 Civil Servants from over 20 Government Departments and agencies who have been selected by the SU, due to their skills and experience in areas such as DDD or their understanding of security and justice, communications, political reconciliation or border management in a stabilisation context. Cadre members receive opportunities to apply for posts related to FCAS countries, both overseas and in London, often requiring individuals at short notice. The Cadre requires people who have a wide range of skills and experiences to suit the broad spectrum of countries in which the SU works, with postings lasting anywhere between two weeks and two years.

Thirdly, and developed from the USA's Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF), the UK has produced its **Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)**, which is a cross-government methodology aimed at improving communication and relationships, identifying and contributing to interdependent tasks, as well as sharing information and data so that a composite and unified understanding of the conflict environment can be generated in a more efficient and timely manner.

Lastly, there is the UK **Conflict Pool (CP)**, which delivers measurable impact in the government's highest priority FCAS programmes. The CP supports core UK strategies such as the National Security Strategy, Strategic Defence and Security Review, and the Building Stability Overseas Strategy, which looks at 'upstream prevention'. The integrated approach is discussed with the CP 2013 strategic guidance document [9] in terms of its delivery of the integrated approach through Diplomatic, Development, and Defence (DDD) efforts. Besides highlighting the strength of multi-disciplinary interventions, the strategy document also discusses issues such as strategic frameworks, the governance and finance mechanisms, evaluation, and principles of best practice. However, the CP will be dissolved in 2015 to make way for the new **Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)**. The CSSF will have increased funding and will build upon the success of the CP by engaging in a broader range of activities that will include security and intelligence within the DDD construct. Naturally, this will bring new challenges to some aspects of the integrated approach, particularly for new members and a wider range of external, private company suppliers who are unfamiliar with hitherto CP-funded activities.

ASSESSMENT OF INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

In light of all that has been discussed thus far, the time is right to discuss how these activities contribute to this paper's symposium sub-theme of *assessment of interagency cooperation*. Within the UK, the term *Evaluation* is the approved and dominant term for assessing the impact of activities. This is becoming increasingly recognised across whole-of-government; for example, it is reflected in the UK Cabinet Office's recent strategy paper on Government Communications [2], the Evaluation of Government Communication Activity [10], as well as DFID's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework [11], which defines evaluation as "the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation, and results in relation to specified evaluation criteria". Even as far back as 2003, with the Cabinet Office's framework for assessing qualitative research evidence [12], the term evaluation has been in use. Most recently, the MOD's Communications Capability Review [13] stated that "There should be greater focus on the measurement and evaluation of communications activities".

¹<http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/how-to-get-involved/civilian-stabilisation-group/cssc/178-civil-service-stabilisation-cadre.html>

Within Defence the term ‘measurement of effect’ (MOE) is used to describe forms of assessment or evaluation. The ability to demonstrate MOE has received much attention and been subject to lots of opinion [14], but UK military doctrine is clear [15], MOE is essentially an assessment process and not a process of identifying direct causation, which it is often seen as being. In light of this, StratCom has been criticised for its inability to conduct rigorous evaluation (MOE) [16, 17], but the UK government is now getting to grips with evaluation in the communications and conflict domains. For example, the Government Communications Service (GCS) has been tasked with improving the evaluation and impact of communications activity for whole-of-government. The GCS have developed a Government Communications Evaluation Course, which is a basic introduction and a practical approach to the evaluation of government communication projects and campaigns. The GCS evaluation report and course content suggests using the acronym PROOF in visualising five guiding principles of evaluation (Pragmatic, Realistic, Objective, Open, Fully-integrated), as well as IDIA as a four-stage evaluation process (Identify, Develop, Implement, Analyse and report).

Additionally, there is a whole-of-government forum that is currently addressing the behaviour change challenges of government communication. This forum has developed a five-point action plan, whereby two of these actions will address: (1) developing a bespoke ‘UK Government Approach’ to behaviour change through communications, with an associated set of basic principles that become part of the standard toolkit of all communicators; and (2) establishing a single source of collated behavioural insights, accessible to all government communication staff. Furthermore, DFID has produced two useful ‘How to...’ documents to inform the cross-government and inter-agency community about evaluation. The first document addresses the evaluation of influence [18] and the second addresses how to measure and evaluate results in FCAS programmes [19]. Finally, although the ‘A’ in the JACS methodology stands for ‘analysis’ it should be kept in mind that JACS is a light touch methodology for improving shared understanding and situational awareness and not analysis per se.

Despite these improvements, the assessment and evaluation of activities that support the integrated approach are not a panacea and must be considered as work in progress, rather than an answer for everything [1]. Others who have experienced, studied and reported on cross-government analysis also support this warning [20] and are currently working in whole-of-government and cross-government forums to help provide expert knowledge and skills to further develop these capabilities.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND DECISIONS

The broad utility of comprehensive/integrated activity has been highlighted [1]. However, it is also worth discussing how it contributes supporting evidence to aid the decision-making of senior military commanders as well as diplomatic and/or development officials, whether that is at tactical, operational or strategic levels. This is referred to as evidence-based decision making (EBDM), evidence-based policy making (EBPM), or even evidence-based practice (EBP) [21] and is part of what some in think tanks call ‘the impact agenda’. This issue is especially pertinent at the operational and strategic levels where single activities will not be the only source of evidence. Therefore, the impact of an activity will be judged and considered alongside supporting (and possibly competing) evidence within the military and inter-agency activity space (i.e., comprehensive or integrated).

Within stabilisation interventions, evaluation is necessary to be able to demonstrate a successful Theory of Change [22] that helps provide an accurate picture of activity that motivates decision makers to pursue the right policy response. UK military doctrine [15] states that assessment is used, predominantly, to support current and imminent planning decisions, and within the UK’s Joint Doctrine Note on assessment [23] some of the key messages highlight that the role of assessments are to enable commanders to test assumptions, judge progress, learn and adapt; whilst respecting the differing perspectives and influence of the inter-agency and multinational involvement in order to assess the impact of civilian and other military activities, including

those of host nations and allies. Using an EBDM approach also helps to limit the potential for errors in judgement by commanders and senior decision-makers under conditions of uncertainty, or what the philosopher Bertrand Russell referred to as ‘how to act decisively in the absence of certainty’ [24]. There is a plethora of research on the biases that affect human rationality and decision making, and these biases have been found to be systematic and predictable [25]. Therefore, the ability to conduct evaluation (or assessment) of inter-agency co-operation within an EBDM, EBPM and EBP approach in support of the integrated approach needs to be based on principles of best practice and toward a science of evaluation, but whilst also adhering to a realistic approach in complicated and complex environments [26].

SUMMARY

This paper has briefly discussed how the UK has advanced its comprehensive approach to one of deeper integration via whole-of-government, cross-government and inter-agency approaches; particularly from the perspective of strategic communication. The integrated approach is aimed at promoting a common way of thinking and a common way of working, and communication underpins the integrated approach by trying to unify ‘words and deeds’. The evaluation of StratCom, as well as integrated activities, becomes increasingly salient given the predicted changing character of war and conflict and the need for improved EBDM, EBPM and EBP.

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