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Strategizing Strategic Communication

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As the two-front war in Iraq and Afghanistan continues, Congress is finally beginning to calibrate the nation's instruments of foreign policy on a new front—the information battle in the War on Terror. While scholars and policymakers may differ on what to call this new battlefield—the War of Ideas, Fourth Generation Warfare, or Soft Power—most would agree that the U.S. government has done a woeful job in wielding its most effective tool to engage foreign audiences: strategic communication.

Recent proposals by Congress to bolster strategic communication, such as those contained in the Smith–Thornberry amendment (H.A. 5) to the 2009 Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 5658), are vital tools to fix lack of leadership, poor interagency coordination, and lack of resources. This amendment would require the creation of a comprehensive interagency strategy for strategic communications and public diplomacy, a description of the specific roles of the State and Defense Departments, and a detailed assessment of the viability of a new Center for Strategic Communication.

While by no means a silver bullet, these proposals are an important first step toward finally utilizing all facets of the U.S. government to win hearts and minds abroad.

Defining Strategic Communication. What exactly is strategic communication? Ask officials from the Departments of State and Defense and each would likely give a different answer because there is no government-wide definition. According to Jeffrey Jones, former Director for Strategic Communications and Information on the National Security

Council, strategic communication is the “synchronized coordination of statecraft, public affairs, public diplomacy, military information operations, and other activities, reinforced by political, economic, military, and other actions, to advance U.S. foreign policy interests.”¹ Basically, it is the ability of many government organizations to coordinate and synchronize a clear, articulate message of America's goals, policies, and values to friends, allies, neutrals, and adversaries across the globe.

Accomplishing this is much more difficult than it sounds. The message (or variations thereof) must be tailored for different geographic, demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. In addition, this process goes far beyond “send-message-receive.” If conducted properly, strategic communications would serve as a dialogue or two-way education because the same information and analysis used to craft messages would enable government leaders and policymakers to sharpen their judgment and decision-making.

Since Congress and the Clinton Administration disbanded the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999, the burden of strategic communications has fallen on a host of different organizations: the White House Office of Global Communications, the

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National Security Council, the Departments of State and Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Each of these boasts significant capabilities. Unfortunately, they are not being utilized fully because there is not a national communications strategy to delineate each organization's role and purpose.

Reality Bites. The fact that there is no national security strategy for strategic communications—or even a government-wide definition of “strategic communications”—seven years into the War on Terror is nothing less than a travesty.

In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda deputy, proclaimed, “More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle, a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.” Yet, rather than a clear, synchronized response to this communication challenge, the U.S. government has created a cacophony of discordant messages. Colonel Lindsey Borg, a public affairs officer in the Air Force recently stated: “[Without] a clear, articulate strategy from national leadership...each department, agency, and office are left to decide what is important. In most cases the answer is to use the organization's communication efforts to advance its own interests.”² Simply put, bureaucratic turf battles and misperceptions are not a recipe for success.

In addition, government agencies have insufficiently adopted new communication techniques and technologies that are currently exploited not only by commercial organizations but also by our adversaries. For example, last year the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the Department of State failed to evaluate the impact of its communications efforts on target audiences. They failed to poll target groups and analyze focus group data to determine which messages would resonate. These are basic research capabilities found in almost any modern public relations or marketing firm.

In contrast, other agencies, specifically the Defense Department, have vigorously bolstered their strategic communication capabilities, including a “campaign-style” approach to design, implement, and evaluate their messages. Pointing out these contrasting capabilities, however, should not be used to disparage one organization over another. Rather, it demonstrates the need to coordinate and share capabilities and resources across the government.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. The GAO concludes that these efforts are “hampered by a lack of interagency protocols for sharing information, a dedicated forum to periodically bring key research staff together to discuss common concerns across topics of interests, and a clearinghouse for collected research.”³ This suggests the need for a central information and research hub, which is currently non-existent.

Let's Play Ball. The Smith–Thornberry Amendment seeks to address these problems. Specifically, the legislation seeks to bolster strategic communication through three different proposals:

- **National Strategy.** The amendment would require the president to develop a comprehensive interagency strategy for strategic communication and public diplomacy by the end of 2009. The strategy would lay out overall objectives, goals, actions to be performed, and benchmarks and timetables to achieve them. This would enable individual agencies to prioritize, manage, and implement their resources towards coordinated foreign policy objectives.
- **Defining Roles.** The amendment also requires the president to describe the respective roles of the State and Defense Departments—the two organizations most involved in strategic communication. Ever since the USIA was disbanded and incorporated into the State Department, the relationship between the Departments of State and

1. Jeffrey Jones, “Strategic Communications: A Mandate for the United States,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 39, at www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/1839.pdf (May 29, 2008).
2. Lindsey J. Borg, “Communicating With Intent: The Department of Defense and Strategic Communication,” *Center for Information Policy Research*, February 2008, at http://pirp.harvard.edu/pubs_pdf/borg/borg-i08-1.pdf (May 29, 2008).
3. “U.S. Public Diplomacy: Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research,” *Government Accountability Office*, July 2007, at www.gao.gov/new.items/d07904.pdf (May 29, 2008).

Defense over strategic communications has been marked by turf battles, contrasting goals, and disagreements about their respective responsibilities. Both organizations bring significant, yet diverse, resources and expertise to the table. Defining not only what they are doing but what they *should* be doing is a vital step towards inter-agency cooperation.

- **Center for Strategic Communication.** Finally, the amendment requires the Bush Administration to assess the Defense Science Board's recommendation to establish an independent, non-profit research organization for strategic communication. Modeled after the RAND Corporation and National Endowment for Democracy, the Center for Strategic Communication would serve as a research center for new, often private sector, techniques and technologies, as well as a focal point for different agencies to exchange common concerns and exchange best practices. Finally, the information gathered on regional trends, public opinion, and on local cultures, values,

and religions could enhance the decision-making of our nation's policymakers.

Conclusion. As Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, famously quipped, "How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?"⁴ The bottom line is that the United States can and must improve in strategic communications.

In today's rapidly expanding information universe, efforts to change negative perceptions of American policies and values must be more deliberate, sophisticated, and coordinated. Once the Senate passes its version of the 2009 Defense Authorization Bill, Congress should maintain the Smith-Thornberry amendment during conference negotiations. The proposals contained in it are a vital first step towards fully engaging a massive global audience.

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4. Richard Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2001, at http://hrp.bard.edu/resource_pdfs/holbrooke.message.pdf (May 29, 2008).