papers

No. 26|07 (May 2026)

On Strategic Communications

by **Aurelio Insisa**

Strategic communications emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as US policymakers sought a more integrated form of political communication suited to post-Cold War conflicts, global terrorism, and a rapidly evolving information environment. Unlike traditional public diplomacy, strategic communication embeds communication within decision- and policy-making processes. Western institutions such as the United States, NATO, and the EU attempted to reconcile strategic objectives with credibility, transparency, and democratic values. However, strategic communication faces enduring bureaucratic and political obstacles, including institutional fragmentation, polarisation, and populism. These challenges risk reducing strategic communications to a reactive defensive tool rather than a transformative instrument of statecraft.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Aurelio Insisa *was until 11 May 2026 Senior Research Fellow for Asia within the 'Global actors' programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).*

Paper produced in the framework of the project "New challenges for Italian strategic communication: Ukraine and European security".

This paper is realised with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning and Historical Documentation - Directorate General for Political Affairs and International Security of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in accordance with Article 23-bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

What is 'strategic communication'? It can be defined as the "use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives".[1] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an institution that has invested considerable resources in researching and implementing strategic communications in recent decades, defines it as an approach "based on values and interests" that holistically "encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment".[2] Yet, when looking at state actors, supranational organisations and multilateral institutions, the landscape of strategic communications appears particularly varied. This study provides a concise account of the genealogy, conceptualisation and operationalisation of strategic communications within NATO and the European Union.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section examines the dilemma of state-driven communications in the West in the

[1] Farwell, James P., *Power and Persuasion. The Art of Strategic Communication*, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2012, p. xviii-xix.

[2] Bolt, Neville and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, Riga, NATO StratCom CoE, 2019, p. 46, https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/improving-nato-strategic-communications-terminology/80.

aftermath of the post-World War II backlash against propaganda, covering the emergence of public diplomacy in the United States as a potential solution. The second section reviews the genealogy of strategic communications focusing on its origins within the US defence and security apparatus during the Global War on Terror, and the eventual demise of the concept within US institutions. The third section covers the continuing evolution of the concept within NATO and the EU. The fourth section provides instead a brief account of the views of European experts on strategic communications in the 2020s. The conclusion sums up findings while also briefly addressing how strategic communications contributes to shape international politics in a transitional age marked by continuing geopolitical and geo-economic turmoil and the re-emergence of major kinetic conflicts between state actors as a defining feature of international politics.

1. Propaganda, public diplomacy and the dilemma of Western state-driven communication

In the absence of a scholarly consensus over the meaning of the term "propaganda", definitions vary widely

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For Lasswell, "propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols".[3] For De Vito, it is "organized persuasion".[4] For Jowett and O'Donnell, it is "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist".[5] O'Shaughnessy suggests that "there is probably no essentialist meaning to the term propaganda or clear way to distinguish it from other forms of dynamic persuasion, except via its practice as revealed over time".[6] Against this backdrop, the term has been used to describe pre-modern, early modern and modern modes of political communication.[7]

The term itself traces back to the 17th century when, in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church established in 1622 the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* ("Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith" – supplanted since 2022 by the Dicastery for Evangelisation), with the aim to counter

[3] Lasswell, Harold D., "The Theory of Political Propaganda", in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (August 1927), p. 627-631 at p. 627, DOI: 10.2307/1945515.
[4] DeVito, Joseph A., *The Communication Handbook. A Dictionary*, New York, Harper & Row, 1986, p. 239.
[5] Jowett, Garth S. and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 4th ed., 2006, p. 7.
[6] O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas, *Marketing the Third Reich. Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 3.
[7] Jowett, Garth S. and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, cit., p. 49-92.

the diffusion of Protestantism in Northern Europe.[8] Yet propaganda is nowadays understood as an inherently "modern" concept, namely a concept rooted in the emergence of technologies, institutions and socio-economic dynamics proper of the "modern age". Among them: the emergence of nation states with enhanced means to exercise state power at all levels of society, the emergence of mass societies following the diffusion of the industrial revolution across the globe, the development of mass parties and of mass-mobilising ideologies, and – crucially – the emergence of a technological context enabling mass communication, first via newspapers and other printed media and eventually by radio, cinema and television.[9]

This modern character of propaganda was thoroughly fleshed out in the brutal arena of World War I, which showcased how modern states could deploy new techniques to shape perceptions and mobilise masses.[10] The ensuing backlash against propaganda, in turn, was a complex and nuanced process. In the short-term, one driver was the profound reckoning over the consequences of the conflict within European societies in the immediate post-war era. In later stages, another driver discrediting propaganda was its use by right-wing and left-wing totalitarian regimes first in the interwar era and eventually at the onset of the Cold War.[11] Thus, as totalitarian regimes embraced and perfected propaganda techniques, propaganda itself became associated with a mode of political communication featuring one-way information flows, widespread use of falsehoods and distortions, and malicious intent.[12]

As totalitarian regimes embraced and perfected propaganda techniques, propaganda itself turned into a taboo among Western states and their societies

The consequence of this backlash was the widespread perception of propaganda as an unacceptable mode of political communication among Western states and their societies. In other words, propaganda turned into a taboo – something to which only domestic opponents and foreign enemies resort. This propaganda taboo has created a persistent dilemma for Western states. How to produce and disseminate information capable of shaping perceptions and persuade audiences that would not be perceived as "propaganda"?

[8] Prendergast, Maria Theresa and Thomas A. Prendergast, "The Invention of Propaganda: A Critical Commentary on and Translation of Inscrutabili Divinae Providentiae Arcano", in Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 19-27.

[9] Jowett, Garth S. and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, cit., p. 93-96.

[10] Taylor, Philip M., *Munitions of the Mind. A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*, Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 176-197.

[11] O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas, *Selling Hitler. Propaganda and the Nazi Brand*, London, Hurst, 2016; Kenez, Peter, *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

[12] Insisa, Aurelio, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications: Insights into PRC External Propaganda", in *Defence Strategic Communications*, Vol. 10 (Spring-Autumn 2021), p. 111-152 at p. 115, https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/chinas-discourse-on-strategic-communications-insights-into-prc-external-propaganda/227.

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It is important to highlight here how this dilemma did not concern Cold War-era Marxist-Leninist regimes, for whom propaganda remained a legitimate tool for political education justified by the fact that the workers in the process of class struggle could not develop the necessary class consciousness to bring about the revolution.[13] As Kenez concisely explains, this approach reflected "a belief that some people knew better than others; therefore, it was unwise to allow people to look after their own interests".[14] In fact, this specific Leninist heritage is reflected in the continuing use of the term propaganda (albeit only at a domestic level) by contemporary Marxist-Leninist regimes such as today's China.[15]

Yet, for Western states there was no single answer to this question. On the one hand, the complex history of covert information operations targeting domestic and foreign audiences during the Cold War shows how Western states continued to use propaganda techniques, and in specific bureaucratic settings and strategic environments "psychological warfare", to achieve their strategic objectives.[16] On the other hand, there remained a pressing demand for a type of political communication capable of engaging the global public opinion without being perceived as "propaganda".

The emergence of "public diplomacy" in the United States in the 1960s was an early attempt to solve this issue. The term was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, a former Ambassador who was the then Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, as he established a new "Center for Public Diplomacy". Guillon's new term reflected a belief that "the proliferation of broadcast media and dawn of satellite communication", as well as "international exchange" and "cultural work", had forced a "radical departure" of "diplomatic practice".[17] Since the 1960s, first in the United States and gradually across other Western countries, public diplomacy has emerged as "the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly and indirectly those public attitudes and opinions that bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions, or increasingly network to network".[18] At a deeper level, public diplomacy conceptually departs from propaganda by replacing its one-way, top-down dynamic with a "two-way learning" between

[13] Kenez, Peter, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, cit., p. 5-6.
[14] Ibid., p. 6-7.
[15] Insisa, Aurelio, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications", cit., p. 115.
[16] Bale, Jeffrey M., *The Darkest Side of Politics, Vol. I: Postwar Fascism, Covert Operations, and Terrorism*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018.
[17] Cull, Nicholas J., "Roof for a House Divided: How U.S. Propaganda Evolved into Public Diplomacy", in Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 131-146 at p. 131.
[18] Snow, Nancy, "Rethinking Public Diplomacy in the 2020s", in Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, London/New York, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2020, p. 3-12 at p. 8.

US federal support to the cultural activities at the heart of public diplomacy was gradually dismantled in the 1990s

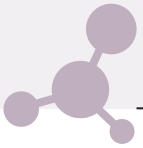
the actors involved.

As Cull argues, US institutions were ultimately able by the end of the Cold War to give life to an approach to political communication capable of transcending "its origins in propaganda". This notwithstanding, a close examination of the institutional history of US public diplomacy reveals how its funding, agenda and articulation, shaped by infighting among federal institutions and shifting priorities across Cold War administrations, shows how this emancipation was never fully achieved.[19] In fact, following the end of the Cold War and the intensification of polarisation in American domestic politics, US federal support to the cultural activities at the heart of public diplomacy was gradually dismantled in the 1990s, leaving the playground to other Western states, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, willing to keep investing in the exercise, and crucially willing to allow for the institutional independence of their public diplomacy assets.[20] From this perspective, the success and popularisation of the concept of soft power, ushered in by Joseph Nye's seminal work between the 1990s and 2000s,[21] provides a snapshot of a specific historical moment – one marked by US unipolarity and a major acceleration of globalisation – during which America appeared capable of dispensing with coordinated efforts to directly shape contested information environments, relying instead on the diffuse structural power of its political, economic and cultural institutions.

2. From the UN to the US: The origins of strategic communications

By the mid-1990s UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan envisioned a fundamental shift in the organisation's communication. This new type of communication was supposed not only to be proactive rather than passive. It aimed at seizing the media agenda rather than being controlled by it, but it was also meant to be capable of telling in a more effective the UN "story". In 1997 the UN Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities published the report *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations*. The report outlined an institutional restructuring that would allow communication experts in the UN to be integrated into the organisation's decision-making and policy-making processes, rather than merely conveying decisions externally. The findings of

[19] Cull, Nicholas J., "Roof for a House Divided", cit., p. 140-142.
[20] Ibid., p. 143.
[21] Nye, Joseph S., *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1990; Nye, Joseph S., *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2004.



By the mid-2000s, the momentum for UN strategic communications dissipated

this programme were integrated in the same year in the publication *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*. As Althuis concisely explains, the programme conveyed the conceptual baseline of what would become strategic communications: "what we say and what we do communicates".[22] This reform process would lead to the establishment of a Strategic Communications Division within the UN in 2002, and to the 2004 campaign *Ten Stories the World Should Hear More About*.

By the mid-2000s, however, the momentum for strategic communications dissipated. The 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Global War on Terrorism, and the build-up and conflagration of the War in Iraq, as well as catastrophic events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami affected the UN's ability to shape the information environment to its advantage.[23] Ironically, the very same Global War on Terrorism that contributed to stifle the momentum of UN strategic communications efforts would spur US institutions to embrace it. The *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination* published by the Department of Defense (DoD) in October 2001 effectively introduced the concept to US audiences.

> U.S. civilian and military information dissemination capabilities are powerful assets vital to national security. They can create diplomatic opportunities, lessen tensions that might lead to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to America's interests. [...] Information – not as "spin," but as policy – is not simply a rhetorical flourish in which solutions to a crisis are presented, it is an integral part of the solution itself.[24]

This excerpt from the 2001 DoD report fleshes out a fundamental point of convergence with the original UN approach to strategic communications, namely the integration of communication activity within the policy-making process and the institutions deputed to such process. Such a shift will in fact remain a tenet of strategic communications. Yet another excerpt from the same report highlights how early reflections on strategic communications within the United States were not simply rooted in efforts to improve public perceptions, but also in the need for shaping crises and achieving objectives *in real time* – namely, in a strategic horizon much more compressed than that of traditional public diplomacy.

[22] Althuis, Jente, "How U.S. Government Fell in and out of Love with Strategic Communications", in *Defence Strategic Communications*, Vol. 10 (Spring-Autumn 2021), p. 71-109 at p. 80, https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/how-us-government-fell-in-and-out-of-love-with-strategic-communications/226.
[23] Ibid., p. 80-83.
[24] Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination*, US Department of Defense, October 2001, p. 1 and 2, https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/default/files/439736.pdf.

> If an authoritarian regime threatens U.S. interests, its population should understand the consequences of its government's actions. If hate radio broadcasts incite to genocide, rational voices should respond. If epidemics threaten populations, accurate information must be provided quickly. If terrorists deploy biological weapons, publics need to know.[25]

The Global War on Terrorism and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq functioned then as a catalyst for a deeper emphasis among US bureaucratic actors on strategic communications

The Global War on Terrorism and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq functioned then as a catalyst for a deeper emphasis among US bureaucratic actors on strategic communications. Reports from the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, and the General Accountability Office exposed deficiencies in how the US communicated its values and policies abroad.[26] This perceived deficit, in turn, prompted a shift toward integrating communications into policymaking, as the need to win hearts and minds in operational theatres became urgent.

Yet the major scope of the effort, as well as the polyphony of bureaucratic actors involved in it, rapidly led to institutional turf wars that eventually defined the landscape of strategic communications in the United States. Within the military, resistance persisted: the Army Intelligence Center opposed counterinsurgency doctrine, co-authored by Gen. David Petraeus, which emphasised cultural understanding and trust-building, viewing it as being outside of traditional military analysis. Military public affairs offices also resisted, seeing strategic communications as a threat to their role of providing neutral, objective information.[27] The National Security Council further complicated matters by conflating strategic communications with public diplomacy in its 2007 *National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*.[28] The Barack Obama Administration, succeeding the George W. Bush Administration in 2009, sought to resolve this growing incoherence. In 2010, the White House published a *National Framework for Strategic Communications*, defining it as the synchronisation of words and deeds to engage foreign audiences. The framework prioritised closing the "say-do gap" and shaping perceptions of the United States as a constructive, respectful global partner. It also called for interagency working groups to improve alignment of messaging and actions. However, it failed to clarify practical implementation or assign responsibility.[29] Against this backdrop, the DoD reframed strategic communications

[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Althuis, Jente, "How U.S. Government Fell in and out of Love with Strategic Communications", cit., p. 85-87.
[27] Ibid., p. 92-94.
[28] Ibid., p. 94-96.
[29] Ibid., p. 98-99.

as a process – integrating audience perception into policymaking and operations – while debates shifted from defining the concept to addressing how and by whom it should be executed.[30]

The debate over strategic communications and its implementation among US bureaucratic actors lost momentum with the end of the Obama Administration and the advent of the first Trump Administration in 2017. Strategic communications was effectively sidelined by a political context marked by hyper-partisanship and the disruptive practices of populist politics; it was perceived, in short, as part of the baggage of the preceding Administration. More importantly, the geopolitical landscape that shaped the US drive to establish strategic communications under the Bush and Obama Administrations profoundly mutated under Trump I and the Joe Biden Administration due to al-Qaeda's decline, the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2017, and the disorderly American retreat from Afghanistan in 2021, a year after the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed in Doha between Washington and the Taliban.[31]

Sino-American global competition provides an ideal catalyst to embrace once again strategic communications

While by the 2020s the threat of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism had not disappeared, focusing primarily on West Africa and the Sahel region, the United States effectively wound down its efforts to counter it, focusing on great power competition against China. It is worth noting that Sino-American global competition provides an ideal catalyst to embrace once again strategic communications, given China's considerable efforts to shape global perceptions and delegitimise the United States' international standing. The communication dimension of this global competition was not lost on President Biden, as proved by his attempt to foster a contraposition between "democracies" and "autocracies".[32] Yet the Biden Administration did not show any interest in and willingness to resume a framework that appeared already exhausted in the Obama era. The return of Trump to the White House in 2025, marked by an ideological drive to disarticulate the machine of the US federal government, arguably closed the door to any potential reintroduction of strategic communications for the foreseeable future.

[30] Ibid., p. 99.
[31] Lahoud, Nelly, "Bin Laden's Catastrophic Success", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 5 (September/October 2021), p. 10-21.
[32] Wissén, Sara, "A Grand Strategy Narrative of Democratic Hope: Legitimizing the Biden Administration's Democracy Versus Autocracy Framework", in *International Politics*, 21 April 2026, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-026-00769-2.

Before the mid-2000s, communication activities within NATO were fragmented and secondary to operational planning

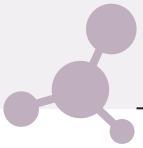
3. The evolution of the StratCom within the Euro-Atlantic milieu: NATO

Before the mid-2000s, communication activities within NATO were fragmented and secondary to operational planning. Public affairs, psychological operations, information operations and public diplomacy existed as separate bureaucratic silos, with communicators generally tasked only with explaining decisions already taken elsewhere. Reforms remained limited to improving public affairs rather than reconceiving communication as a strategic capability.[33] The decisive catalyst was Afghanistan after 2006, when NATO transitioned from peace support operations into counterinsurgency warfare in response to the resurgence of the Taliban. The alliance quickly discovered that military force alone could not secure political outcomes in a conflict where legitimacy, perception and narrative were central. In fact, NATO struggled with incoherent messaging, poor understanding of Afghan audiences, weak coordination among national contingents and civilian actors, and a disconnect between official narratives and battlefield realities.[34]

These failures drove a conceptual shift. Communication activities within the alliance increasingly came to be viewed not as a supporting activity but as an operational "line of effort" integrated into strategy and execution. NATO commanders and communication specialists began experimenting with more coordinated structures linking public affairs, information operations and psychological operations.[35] Against this backdrop, strategic communications gradually came to mean aligning words, actions and narratives in support of political and military objectives. However, as in the case of the United States, the drive to conceptualise and implement strategic communications produced an interinstitutional conflict. Public affairs officers feared that strategic communications, by virtue of its closer association with influence-oriented disciplines, would undermine credibility and blur ethical boundaries.[36]

In detail, much of the internal debate revolved around whether NATO communicators should merely "inform" or actively seek to influence audiences. Advocates of strategic communications argued that all communication inevitably influences perceptions and therefore must be integrated into operational planning rather than treated as neutral information dissemination. A major step occurred in

[33] Laity, Mark, "The Birth and Coming of Age of NATO Stratcom: A Personal History", in *Defence Strategic Communications*, Vol. 10 (Spring-Autumn 2021), p. 21-70 at p. 31-32, https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/the-birth-and-coming-of-age-of-nato-stratcom-a-personal-history/225.
[34] Ibid., p. 26-29.
[35] Ibid., p. 43.
[36] Ibid., p. 45-46.



In 2009, NATO formally defined strategic communications as the coordinated use of public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations and psychological operations in support of Alliance objectives

2007 with the creation of NATO's first Chief Strategic Communications position within the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). This development turned SHAPE into the primary driver of doctrinal development within the alliance. Subsequently, Allied Command Operations (ACO) Directive 95-2 in 2008 established many enduring principles of strategic communications within NATO: the transformed information environment, the importance of strategic narratives, and the integration of communication disciplines into operational planning.[37]

Eventually, allies at the 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl Summit declared that "strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives".[38] The 2009 NATO Strategic Communications Policy institutionalised these developments. It formally defined strategic communications as the coordinated use of public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations and psychological operations in support of Alliance objectives. Continuing operations in Afghanistan also produced practical innovations in the format of frameworks linking political intent, operational behaviour and tactical messaging through a common strategic narrative.[39]

While the conflict in Afghanistan was the catalyst for NATO's embrace of strategic communications, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in the Donbas in 2014 guaranteed its continuing relevance for the alliance. The Russian state's use of deception, disinformation and information warfare demonstrated that informational conflict was central not only to counterinsurgency but also to interstate conflicts and competition. The crises that enveloped Ukraine since 2014 transformed strategic communications from a wartime adaptation into a core component of NATO's broader strategic posture, embedding communication, narrative and influence more deeply into Alliance doctrine and operations.

Published in March 2023, Allied Joint Publication-10 (AJP-10), titled *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications*, fundamentally redefines strategic communications within NATO doctrine. Rather than treating communications as a supporting public affairs activity, the document presents strategic communications as a command group function integrated into all military planning, operations and assessment.[40] The doctrine reflects NATO's adaptation to an

[37] Ibid., p. 36-40.
[38] NATO, *Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration*, 4 April 2009, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2009/04/04/strasbourg--kehl-summit-declaration.
[39] Laity, Mark, "The Birth and Coming of Age of NATO Stratcom: A Personal History", cit., p. 39-40.
[40] UK Ministry of Defence, *Allied Joint Publication-10: Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic*

international environment characterised by persistent strategic competition, hybrid threats, disinformation and continuous contestation in the information environment. The central premise of the doctrine is that contemporary conflict is not decided solely in the physical dimension. Success depends equally on shaping perceptions, beliefs and behaviours among multiple audiences. NATO therefore defines strategic communications as the integration of communication capabilities and information functions with all military activities in order to understand and shape the information environment in support of Alliance objectives. In practice, this means that every military action – deployments, exercises, operations, imagery, statements and even silence – communicates meaning and influences audiences. Actions themselves become communicative instruments.[41]

Understanding audiences becomes as important as understanding enemy military capabilities

AJP-10 places particular emphasis on the "cognitive dimension" of conflict. NATO distinguishes between physical, virtual and cognitive dimensions, but argues that the decisive effects are ultimately cognitive: influencing how audiences interpret events and make decisions. Strategic communications is therefore conceived as an audience-centric endeavour. NATO categorises audiences into publics, stakeholders and actors, and seeks continuously to analyse how these groups perceive NATO activities, process information and respond behaviourally. Understanding audiences becomes as important as understanding enemy military capabilities.[42]

The doctrine also reflects NATO's recognition that the information environment is now permanently contested. States and non-state actors use disinformation, cyber operations, psychological activities and narrative manipulation below the threshold of armed conflict in order to weaken adversaries politically and socially. NATO consequently views itself as operating in a "continuum of competition" extending from peacetime rivalry to open conflict. As a result, strategic communications is not an episodic wartime activity but a permanent requirement. Narratives are central to this approach. NATO argues that all military and political activity must be framed within coherent narratives explaining why the Alliance acts, what objectives it pursues and how its actions align with democratic legitimacy and collective defence. The doctrine distinguishes between institutional narratives tied to NATO's identity, broader strategic narratives supporting campaigns or operations, and more localised micro-narratives aimed at specific audiences. Consistency between

Communications (henceforth AJP-10), Edition A Version 1, UK Change 1, 2023, p. 1, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allied-joint-doctrine-for-strategic-communications-ajp-10.

41 Ibid., p. 20-21.

42 Ibid., p. 12.

words, images and actions is treated as essential for credibility.[43]

Organisationally, AJP-10 institutionalises strategic communications across NATO's command structure. The doctrine creates dedicated J10 Strategic Communications directorates within headquarters, integrating public affairs, information operations, psychological operations and audience analysis into unified structures directly linked to commanders. These bodies conduct Information Environment Assessments, analyse audiences and narratives, integrate communication considerations into operational planning, and coordinate communication-related activities across all levels of command.[44]

From a NATO perspective, the doctrine represents the culmination of the shift inherent in the concept of strategic communications, it being no longer understood primarily as media engagement or message dissemination. Instead, NATO conceptualises military operations themselves as communicative acts conducted within a continuously contested information environment. The objective is not simply to inform publics, but to shape perceptions, maintain legitimacy, strengthen deterrence and influence behaviour across the full spectrum of strategic competition.

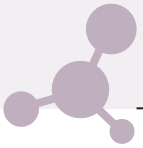
4. The evolution of the StratCom within the Euro-Atlantic milieu: The EU

Russia's information operations targeting European audiences prompted the EU to embrace strategic communications

Russia's information operations targeting European audiences in the wake of its illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of the war in the Donbas in 2014 proved instrumental in prompting the EU to embrace strategic communications – much as the resurgence of Taliban offensives in Afghanistan had catalysed a similar turn within NATO in the preceding decade. At the European Council meeting of March 2015, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, member states and EU institutions were called upon to develop a coordinated response to Russia.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) was consequently tasked with drafting an Action Plan on Strategic Communication, to be delivered by June of that year.[45] The document outlined three core objectives. The first was to effectively communicate and promote EU policies and values to countries in the Eastern neighbourhood

[43] Ibid., p. 6-7.
[44] Ibid., p. 15-16.
[45] Valenza, Domenico, "The Trap of Geopolitics: Rethinking EU Strategic Communication", in *CEPOB: College of Europe Policy Briefs*, No. 3.21 (March 2021), p. 2, https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/valenza_cepob_3_2021_final.pdf_0.pdf.



of the Union. The second was to strengthen the broader media environment in those regions. The third was to increase public awareness of disinformation activities carried out by external actors, while simultaneously improving the EU's own capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities. Underpinning these objectives was a broader ambition: building a shared space of democracy, prosperity and stability capable to reinforce democratic values, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.[46]

What has the Action Plan led to in concrete terms? At a bureaucratic level, it frames the European Commission as the primary body responsible for official EU communication. Its Directorate-General for Communication oversees the Commission's public image, ensuring it aligns with the institution's stated values and political priorities, while also monitoring and reporting on public opinion. The Commission identifies several guiding principles for its communication work: transparency, ethical behaviour, equal opportunities, multilingualism and sensitivity to digital transformation and environmental impact. Transparency is not merely an aspiration but a legal obligation under Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, requiring EU bodies to give citizens and stakeholders access to legislative texts, official documents, meeting agendas and minutes. Ethical behaviour, meanwhile, refers to the duty of both Commissioners and staff to serve the public interest and operate within established frameworks of integrity and conduct.[47]

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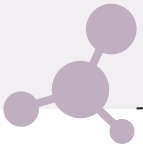
In terms of public engagement, the EU has developed several mechanisms intended to foster two-way communication with citizens. The "Have Your Say" platform allows citizens, businesses and organisations to submit feedback and participate in consultations at various stages of the legislative process. It forms part of the Commission's "Better Regulation" agenda, which aims to produce evidence-based, efficient, and citizen-responsive policies. Separately, the European Citizens' Panel offers a more open-ended forum in which members of the public are consulted on broader questions about the EU's future. Unlike "Have Your Say," this panel sits outside the formal legislative process and is designed to give policymakers a sense of public sentiment rather than targeted feedback on specific proposals.[48] EU communication appears then as deeply value-laden, rooted in the concept of "Normative Power Europe" – the idea that the EU wields influence not through military or economic force alone, but through the promotion of norms such as democracy, human

[46] Strotz, Sam, *The Integrity of the EU's Strategic Communication: How Trustworthy Is the EU's Strategic Communication?*, MA Thesis, Universität Innsbruck, August 2025, p. 18, https://ulb-dok.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/12371620.
[47] Ibid., p. 19.
[48] Ibid., p. 18.



EU strategic communication addresses external threats by hostile foreign actors in the information domain both within its borders and within its neighbourhood

rights, the rule of law and sustainability. This framing is visible across a wide range of policy areas, from the European Green Deal to digital regulation, where communications consistently foreground principles like environmental stewardship, privacy and social justice. The goal is to build legitimacy and public trust both within the EU and beyond its borders.[49]

As previously mentioned, EU strategic communications does not focus exclusively on "explaining" EU actions and values to its citizens but also addresses external threats by hostile foreign actors in the information domain both within its borders and within its neighbourhood. The first concrete step in this direction was the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force within the EEAS. The task force's mandate covered three areas: communicating and promoting EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; strengthening the media environment both in the region and within the Union's member states; and – above all – addressing and responding to disinformation activities by external actors, namely Russia. The challenge coming from the Kremlin became in fact the key driver in shaping EU strategic communications efforts, primarily through the conceptual framework of "disinformation", as shown by the flagship initiative launched by the task force, EU vs.Disinfo.[50] The East StratCom Task Force eventually became the blueprint for other ad hoc units: the South StratCom Task Force, established to counter the operations of the Islamic State in the information domain, and the Western Balkans StratCom Task Force, aiming at challenging Russia's activities among the states of the region, which are all candidates for EU membership.[51]

The framing of the Russian challenge in the information domain through the lens of "disinformation" centred the EEAS' response on the binary of truth versus falsehood, implicitly resting upon the assumption that if false narratives could be identified and debunked, the threat could be neutralised. Yet by the early 2020s, and in the wake of the societal turmoil caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the limitations of this framing became increasingly apparent. Factchecking proved reactive rather than preventive, and the focus on individual false claims obscured the more structural dimension of the threat, namely the deliberate, coordinated manipulation of the information environment by state actors, regardless of whether any specific piece of content was technically "false". EU strategic communications actors thus recognised that sophisticated operations in the information domain can achieve their objectives simply through selective amplification, context distortion, or

[49] Ibid., p. 19.
[50] Valenza, Domenico, "The Trap of Geopolitics", cit.
[51] Ibid., p. 2.

In the early 2020s, EEAS replaced "disinformation" as the organising concept with the notion of "foreign information manipulation and interference" (FIMI)

the exploitation of genuine societal divisions, none of which are straightforwardly addressed by debunking.

This conceptual exhaustion prompted the EEAS to undertake a significant reframing in the early 2020s, replacing "disinformation" as the organising concept with the notion of "foreign information manipulation and interference" (FIMI). The new framework deliberately shifted emphasis away from the content of hostile messaging and towards the behaviour and intent of the actors behind it, drawing on threat-intelligence methodologies more familiar to the security community. Moving beyond the issue of "truthfulness", the FIMI framework focuses on the manipulative and coordinated behaviour of threat actors, potentially grounding the EEAS' response in the development of systemic resilience rather than the inherently asymmetric game of fact-correction.[52]

Conclusion

The concept of strategic communications emerged between the late 1990s and early 2000s during a transitional phase of state-driven political communication. The end of the Cold War marked a decline in the US federal government's efforts in public diplomacy. Yet the post-Cold War conflicts and the global rise of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism, as well as a rapidly changing information ecology driven by technological innovations in a globalising world, pushed US bureaucratic actors to conceive a new form of political communication capable of effectively supporting the achievement of strategic objectives – strategic communications. In doing so, they drew on a fundamental intuition of the UN under Secretary General Annan: to integrate communication activities within decision-making and policy-making processes under the assumption that *everything* an institution does communicates.

These premises highlight the distinction between strategic communications and public diplomacy, as the latter operates primarily through people-to-people exchanges and cultural activities to achieve transformative effects over an inevitably longer time horizon. Yet these very same premises also highlight the continuing relevance of the dilemma in which Western states have been caught since "propaganda" became a political taboo in the twentieth century. How can Western states produce and disseminate information with the aim of achieving political objectives without resorting to selective interpretations, distortions, and falsehoods? The United States under the Bush II and especially the Obama Administrations,

[52] European External Action Service, *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Towards a Framework for Networked Defence*, February 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/425201_en.

NATO and the EU have wrestled with this question, emphasising credibility vis-à-vis audiences, consistency with professed values, and transparency in their conceptualisation and implementation of strategic communication activities.

Yet, these efforts led to a more fundamental question. Is strategic communications possible? The experiences discussed above suggest that the challenge is twofold. The primary dimension of the issue is *bureaucratic*. The integration of communication activities in decision-making and policy-making processes leads to turf wars among competing bureaucratic actors and internal resistance to change. Failure to rein in these actors in turn leads to an institutional polyphony that contradicts the very same premises of strategic communications. The second dimension of the challenge is *political*. Nation states such as the United States under the Obama Administration, military alliances such as NATO, and supranational institutions such as the EU, have been able to successfully establish an infrastructure for strategic communications. Yet the effectiveness and resilience of these infrastructures is continuously tested. Political polarisation, hyper-partisanship and the disruptions typically associated with populist politics may contribute or even lead to the demise of strategic communications infrastructures – as in the case of the United States.

Specific institutional designs such as those of NATO and of the EU may insulate these actors from these threats. But such a development may also result either in a particularly narrow scope for strategic communication (as in the case of NATO – squarely focused on the alliance activity) or to a disconnect between one supranational actor such as the EU and its member states, who may be either unable or unwilling to perform strategic communications. Against this backdrop, strategic communications risks turning into a purely reactive effort to threats in the information domain by hostile actors, failing to achieve those transformational goals for which it was originally conceived in order to overcome the dilemma of state-driven communication that emerged from the tabooisation of propaganda.

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T +39 06 6976831
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