

Strategic Communications (StratCom) in a disruptive world

(Supporting narrative linked to his PPT brief. This is not the text of the presentation.)

- StratCom is not just operating within our disruptive environment it is also one of the main causes and drivers of the disruption.
- What is commonly called 'Hybrid Warfare' is now the primary form of conflict in most of our societies, and the Information Line of Effort (LoE) is a fully integrated and fundamental part of hybrid conflict. Even where combat is significant, such as Syria or Iraq, the communication effort remains critical to the outcome.
- In principle hybrid is not so new – there are Sun Tzu quotes that can be used – but in practice the transformative impact of information has elevated the importance of StratCom, or what the Russians would call Information Confrontation.
- This hybrid conflict, or New Generation Warfare as some would label it, has many other potential elements such as economics, diplomatic, subversion, corruption as well as the Info LoE, all intending to decisively shape the security environment before significant traditional combat, or even to render it unnecessary.
- It is not new that StratCom (even under other terms) is used as a part of achieving security goals, so why does it matter so much now? In essence because the technology of communication is so pervasive and so fundamental that it is having a transformative effect. A loose analogy would be to compare the supporting effects of airpower in 1914 with its fundamental impacts by 1945. The smartphone and all that lies behind it is transformative.
- That influence is less kinetic than cognitive, so it's about influence at the psychological level, making 'Perception becomes Reality'.
- The nature of communication has also become more complex and usually more disruptive. The old model of directed communication has been replaced by networked engagement where the 'illusion of control has been replaced by the reality of influence'. More people need to be engaged and audiences want to be listened to not spoken at.
- This cacophony of communication means traditional leaderships are more vulnerable to opponents who can use cheap but sophisticated IT to compete in the information space. It is also 24/7, reducing decision time, another disruptive factor for policy making, especially when there are so many sources of information to assess, moving us from information deficit to overload.
- The new information environment is proving more open both to cyber-attack from anonymous opponents, making response difficult, but also a more emotive, divisive environment where people live in their own bubbles, making discourse

harder. So-called 'fake news' is a reflection of people believing what they want to believe and where an agreed basis of common facts is harder to achieve. When you cannot even agree on a starting point then you have disrupted, chaotic space.

- At the same time the salience of this new information era still puts a premium on understanding the basic instincts, cultures and behavioural factors that motivate both individuals and societies. As behavioural psychologist Daniel Kahneman explained, "No-one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story."
- Narratives need to be understood as more than stories, but as an organisational scheme expressed in story form. Stories about a community's history provide models of how actions and consequences are linked, and are often the basis for strategies and actions. In other words a strategic narrative.
- Most if not all of the dramatic recent events in our world have at their heart a narrative which drives people to action. Those on the losing end often have a bad or badly explained strategic narrative.
- Putting the cognitive aspects at the heart of our strategies is also critical to effective airpower. Its potential impact means opponents put significant effort into shaping attitudes to its use, and western societies in particular are vulnerable to asymmetric responses from opponents relying heavily on information campaigns. Bombing accuracy is no longer enough to gain & maintain support.
- Finally, the disruptive nature of our world is because the certainties of the post-Cold War period are under effective challenge, especially in Europe, but also beyond. We have been living in a period where there were some common and widely accepted assumptions about a so-called 'rules-based order' in which certain values, institutions and ways of doing business were dominant.
- That is now under challenge. What could be termed a return to neo-realist thinking, where the big powers assert their right to dominate their neighbourhood, is now in play. Such a major challenge to an existing order is by definition disruptive, so creating a true clash of strategic narratives being fought out in the new information environment.

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**Mark Laity is speaking in a personal capacity and his comments should not be taken as an expression of official NATO policy*