

# PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN THE AFGHAN THEATRE and the STRATCOM “Dynamic”

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*“There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them”*

Winston Churchill - April 1945

Although the description the “Global War on Terror” is now out of favour in the corridors of power in the United States, it remains an apt description when setting into context the current operational environment. It is almost eight years since the 9/11 Attacks on the United States which proved the catalyst for the opening moves in the ongoing operations being conducted in both Iraq and Afghanistan. After eight years of operations the focus for individual Governments and the US led coalitions has seen a shift from Iraq to Afghanistan. This shift has meant an increase in terms of men, materiel and finance with which it is hoped that a lasting solution may be found. As the political and military focus has shifted, so has the focus of the media. This focus in many ways adds value to the operation particularly at the strategic level. With the focus on Afghanistan and the region as a whole we can expect to see an increase in resources and finance which will allow a lasting solution to be realised. There are of course negative aspects to this shift in focus, in particu-

lar the rapid increase in numbers of media; the so called “Fourth Estate”, added to the already dynamic yet complex Afghan operating environment. The way in which we as a NATO coalition alongside Operation Enduring Freedom are able to manage and shape this media environment will be instrumental in contributing to the final outcome. The task is further hampered by the opinions and requirements of individual nations within the theatre operations. We must recognise these caveats for what they are, whilst ensuring that we approach the very real problems that we face with a dynamic and proactive approach.

A change in administration within the United States of America was bound to herald a shift change. As the military main effort shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan, so the Afghanistan theatre moved out of the shadow of the Iraq based operation in the eyes of the media. The year 2009 has been declared the pivotal year for Afghanistan, her people and their collective future. Presidential Elections, increased Troop deployment and the question of regional stability have all captured the interest of the media and despite the global recession this will remain a constant theme. As the interest and focus in Afghanistan grows, so will the demands

placed on the military's ability to prosecute an effective media campaign. Our actions within the Public Affairs domain must reflect this shift change and must evolve in order to remain a credible and effective actor within the operational structure of the coalition. Of particular relevance to this change in media focus to the Public Affairs Office in theatre has been the advent of STRATCOM and the need for a more cerebral approach to media engagement.

The past six months in Headquarters ISAF have seen an increase in media related activities. The focus of the media operations has been firmly fixed on dealing with the increase in media attention and ensuring that we are postured to contribute to the overall Information Operation Campaign. The introduction of the Strategic Communications (STRATCOM) Branch<sup>1</sup> has caused some ripples within the wider NATO community. Whilst these concerns are recognised it is important to understand that the concept itself is sound and serves only as a coordinating function. Whilst national caveats and national regulations must be strictly adhered to, we must recognise the need for a doctrine governing media and information operations to be further developed in order to reflect the Contemporary Operating Environment and the operational needs of those prosecuting the operation on the ground. Public Affairs must be postured to be proactive in their approach rather than reactive, this will only be achieved if there is integration and coordination between all those involved in messaging. Rather than dismissing the concept of STRATCOM we must embrace it, adapt it and make it work for the media component within the wider campaign plan. We are fighting a tenacious and effective enemy who have an acute understanding of the need and uses of propaganda. Although we do not recognise their actions as Public Affairs or Information operations we must recognise their ability to use these areas to further their strategic end-state. We strive to be first with the known truth; the Insurgent merely strives to be first. On the modern battlefield speed and tempo is vital to dislocating the enemy and denying him freedom of movement. Modern technology means that the war is prosecuted

<sup>1</sup> A coordinating function between INFO OPS, PSYOPS, KLE and PAO.

under the media spotlight where action on the field can be beamed live to a global audience. The insurgents understand this and use the media spectrum to great effect to misinform and misrepresent events. They are not trying to inform the media, they are trying to influence them in order that they may undermine political will and through it, the support for the war. Whilst we lose tempo due to our restrictions, the Insurgent gain it through achieving influence and speed in favour of accuracy and the truth. We cannot and will not mislead or use the media for propaganda purposes, but at the same time we must gain the upper hand in message dissemination through a comprehensive approach through all STRATCOM actors. This is a wicked problem and whilst addressing it physically, we must ensure that we remain true to our own laws and guidance that define who and what we are as democracies. Further development of STRATCOM both as a physical and conceptual component within our approach must be achieved if we are to maximise the effect of the information domain on the modern battlefield. This requires an understanding and an ability to implement an effective campaign within the guidelines received from higher authority.

Whilst STRATCOM provides a coordinating function that better enables and empowers ISAF PA assets to provide effective and coordinated messaging across theatre, we must also ensure that we understand who exactly we should be targeting. We live in an age where the thirst for information drives many facets of our collective societies. As a result the media environment places increased demands on our military to provide accurate and up to date information. The idea of the "Strategic Corporal"<sup>2</sup> is particularly relevant when we consider the media and their ability to influence a target audience, be it domestic or international. This in itself creates complexities that further effect the way in which PA plan and conduct their approach to the media. Currently it is the ability and influence of the international media and the effect that it can have on our own domestic audiences that drives our engagement plans rather than our own profil-

<sup>2</sup> *Small-unit leaders on the ground having to make crucial decisions which may have major impacts on not only the forces initially deployed on the mission, but to the mission as a whole.*



ing of what the media can provide in terms of wider campaign effects. The Operational Centre of Gravity remains the Afghan population; historically the only way in which a long term success can be achieved in a Counter Insurgency Campaign is by influencing this centre of gravity. STRATCOM must ensure that their efforts and energies are focused on being able to influence the Afghan population in order to demonstrate the commitment of ISAF and more importantly the effectiveness of the Afghan Government and Security Forces. In support of this the PAO must be empowered and enabled to inform the Afghan media and through it gain influence within the Afghan population. There are of course many complications that face ISAF when trying to achieve this focused engagement with the Afghan media.

The International Media is a powerful and influential body that focuses the efforts of higher commands and political leadership alike. The demand for information means that our own focus has perhaps drifted from the Operational Centre of Gravity to the point where more of our energies are focused on justifying support for the war than are given to winning it. In recent months the vast majority of media engagement has gone to an international audience rather than an Afghan one. Whilst we would be naïve to not expect to have to justify the expense of this war in terms of “blood and treasure” to our own domestic audiences, we cannot afford to do this at the expense of justifying our actions to the Afghan population. The media effort must be split evenly to ensure that that the focus for ISAF, the Afghan population, is fully demonstrated.

Despite the requirement to engage with the Afghan Media, it must be recognised that the ability to achieve tangible results is

hampered by the capability and structure of the media itself. The Afghan media environment is immature and as yet underdeveloped. Although there is a residue potential, thirty years of war and persecution has taken its toll. The ability and reach of the media required to inform and influence target audiences across Afghanistan is limited by infrastructure, literacy and the media skill set that we expect as a norm from the International media. In order to inform the Afghan population through their own media we must first enable, and then empower it. This will take reconstruction and development outside what we normally would expect to do and certainly away from the capabilities of military forces alone. If we wish our messages to be disseminated to a wider population then we must invest, not only through inclusion of Afghan journalists, but through their education and media development. We must also recognise that Key Leader Engagement must include the key opinion formers and influencers within the Afghan media environment.

The situation that confronts ISAF is dynamic and changeable across the military spectrum. The problems are all wicked in nature and we must approach them in a manner that enables and includes all actors, agencies and influencers. The demands placed upon all members of ISAF are challenging but by no means insurmountable. We must however adapt and change to meet these demands. If we are to win in the information/media domain we must be able to utilise all assets available and adopt our Tactics, Techniques and Procedures to meet the associated challenges. We must understand our environment and fight to become masters of it, only then will be able to ensure that the so called fourth estate is truly reflective of what is actually happening on the ground. As an organisation we must have the ability to look in (Afghan centric) and build, whilst at the same time looking outwards and sustaining. Within media operations all actors are important but none more so than those who we are fighting to protect.

*“The support of international media will allow us to stay in the war; the support of the Afghan media will set the conditions that will allow us to win it”.*

Note: Also Printed in the JWC Stavanger Journal ■