



PUBLIC AFFAIRS AS AN OPERATIONAL FUNCTION

How NATO doctrine has changed

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Many studies have concluded that with the fall of Berlin wall in 1989 a new age came into being. Ten years of international instability followed, characterized by civil wars erupting, particularly among the former states of the Soviet empire. But since 2001 things have been getting worse. The American writer Samuel Huntington talked of a “clash of civilizations”. His analysis divided the world onto 8 civilisations fighting each other for economy, nationalism, religion. However, it is the widely understood that terrorism has become the main international threat to global security. Furthermore, the world has become smaller due to the developments in technology, communications and mass media; everyone everywhere can be linked in real time to an audience on the other side of the world. Information travels faster and deeper than ever before. The Internet and modern social networks can be easily used by an adversary to spread a message, ideals or have a psychological effect.

Open communication and the relationship between the military and the public to inform people are essential to the success of modern military operations. The new NATO doctrine on Public Affairs, MC 0497/1, already effective for almost two years, has introduced fundamental changes, after considering kinds of threats to international security now and in

the future. Public information has been always considered as fundamental for the conduct of the military NATO-led operations, but since the issue of the new doctrine the trend has been for Public Affairs to become a more significant military function. This is especially true when Public Affairs is linked to the Info Ops, Psyops and CIMIC, however, it is important to realise that despite the obvious linkage Public Affairs is a completely separate issue. MC 0497/1 defines NATO Public Affairs as “the function responsible to promote NATO’s military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance”.

This is easily demonstrated by the change that NATO Military Committee has implemented with the name of the function. We do not have Public Information any more, but Public Affairs, underlining the separation from Info Ops by name. Furthermore, in the new nomenclature there are three functions of the Public Affairs, now officially recognised as:

- The relations with the media;
- The internal communication;
- The relations with the (local) community.

Any NATO Public Affairs Office and Commanders are empowered to provide the media, the natural mouthpiece to convey the NATO

message, with positive information to reach the target audience. It is also a valuable means to spread information about professional developments and issues or service culture among the military community. However, the most notable function officially acquired by Public Affairs is the responsibility for relations with the community that hosts any NATO HQ.

The new NATO policy defines also the principles of the Public Affairs. First of all, it is willing to tell and show the NATO story, in order to introduce the Alliance to the audience and gain its favour, by displaying what has been already done and what are the actual or future aims.

But Public Affairs also has to provide accurate information in a timely manner. Information must be always accurate and updated, delivered as fresh as possible, especially considering the current 24/7 media environment.

In addition, the information provided must be consistent, complementary and coordinated. The global communication system is in fact a tangled mass of information from multiple or numerous sources, hence the necessity for commanders and Public Affairs officers to ensure the careful selection of the right message, carefully coordinating with the units involved to prevent inconsistency. Another principle is to conduct media activities respecting the appropriate operational security procedures. It means that every message must be carefully considered before its release to the media in order to prevent any adverse affect on any friendly military unit concerned. Above all, it is important to conduct these activities always being mindful of any multinational sensitivities, and respecting any regional or local environment which NATO is involved into.

The kind of approach that NATO Public Affairs follows to accomplish to its objectives in accordance with the principles above described has changed and it has been clearly stated by the new policy. Until 2007, the approach could be active, semi-active or passive: the Public Affairs had the freedom of action to adopt whichever method was appropriate according to the situation and circumstances. The former policy permitted a passive approach, which provided the option not to answer to a media question. Today is not possible to be passive any more with Public Affairs anticipating hostile media questions and meeting such a situation in a proactive manner in order to ensure that the appropriate message reaches the audience.

To be winners in media environment today it is essential to exploit the opportunities provided by new online information tools. The Internet is a helpful system to spread the mili-



tary message in real time. With the Internet we can find not only web-sites, but “blogs”, held by “citizen journalists”, and “social networks” (the most famous example is “facebook”). Whilst they are not accredited media, they are important media forums in world debate and NATO cannot avoid this community or to ignore the collective opinions expressed in social networks and blogs. Footage, imagery and information sharing on the Internet through these tools is vital to maintain the attention of the audience concerning NATO and its operations. An example of this is the possibility to have free access to the ISAF “flickr” or “photobuck” web-pages and share photos of the mission in Afghanistan (see www.flickr.com/photos/isafmedia and <http://s291.photobucket.com/albums/ll313/phantbatts/ISAF/>).

It is easy to understand how Public Affairs is always “on the ground”, preparing the ground before the deployment or conduct of a military campaign. For this reason it is now a very real operational function, no different to the others. It is another fundamental area of battle where it is crucial to prevent the enemy’s freedom of action and manouvre, in the same way that it is crucial to maintain positive public opinion. NATO Chiefs and commanders can achieve a great deal through the conduct of an effective media campaign before, during and after a military operation. It is a valuable means to give credibility to the troops on the ground, demonstrates NATO capability and determination to achieve mission success during a time when information travels faster than at any other time in history. ■