Public Engagement 101

What Strategic Communication Is, Isn't, and Should Be

Secretary of State Clinton speaks to press about meeting on Iran at UN headquarters

UN (Sophie Paris)

By KRISTIN M. LORD

We need to get back to basics." With these words, Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for a hard look at U.S. strategic communication in *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4th Quarter 2009). Admiral Mullen rightly noted that actions speak louder than words, that credibility and trust are key, and that the United States undermines its own power when our government fails to live up to its promises and our nation's values. He called on Americans to be better listeners and to engage foreign audiences, not to arrogantly fire off messages like so many verbal missiles.[1] On all these points, Admiral Mullen is correct. His serious consideration of strategic communication is a welcome contribution to an often stale debate.

This article builds on the Chairman's recent articles and speeches, arguing that public engagement is a powerful instrument of statecraft that can advance our country's broader national security strategy in concert with diplomatic, economic, and military instruments. It can be used to amplify and reinforce the messages sent by our actions. It can also build critical long-term relationships, increasing the odds that the messages we intend our actions to send are actually the messages received.

Strategic communication can realistically accomplish these objectives. Yet to get back to basics, we must also recognize strategic communication's limits and when failure is a result of the application, not the tool. Like any instrument of policy, strategic communication has not always been used well. This is an indictment of the craftsmen, not the craft.

Dr. Kristin M. Lord is Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security.

We need to rethink, not reject, public engagement as an instrument of national security policy.

What Strategic Communication Is—and Isn't

Strategic communication—or as my colleague John Nagl and I prefer to call it, *strategic public engagement*—is the promotion of national interests through efforts to inform, engage, and influence foreign publics.[2] Its importance is growing due to the spread of pluralistic governance, increasing importance of transnational challenges such as transnational crime and terrorism that require global cooperation, widespread availability of cheap and instantaneous information and communications technologies that devolve power to individuals, and limits of force in theaters where the application of violence actually mobilizes support for our enemies. The use of armed force and traditional diplomacy will always be critical. However, they must be bolstered by a comprehensive effort to engage publics, who hold the ability to confer legitimacy and tangible support.

Increasingly, foreign publics have the power to facilitate or block the achievement of American national security interests. Whether the United States seeks to undermine support for various Taliban groups, convince allies to devote more resources to Afghanistan and Pakistan, build global pressure on Iran, or place a new command in Africa, public support is crucial. Engaging foreign publics is also essential to counterinsurgency strategies, whose success hinges on popular legitimacy. Not unlike the Cold War, ideas and ideologies are central to current security threats. Then, as now, the ability to win support for a political ideal, attack competing visions, and undermine the people and networks that hold those competing visions is necessary for success. Military might remains critical, but engagement, persuasion, and the power of an appealing vision are also essential to achieving national security objectives.

Actions speak louder than words, but they are interpreted in a highly contested marketplace of ideas. As public diplomacy guru Marc Lynch points out, "Everything is subject to spin, framing, and interpretation."[3] Even verifiable facts are interpreted differently by different audiences. For instance, was the death of an Afghan interpreter during the recent rescue of a *New York Times* reporter a tragic and unintentional event or yet another sign that allied troops value Western life over Afghan life? Viewed in the aftermath of a German bombing that killed many civilians, many Afghans perceive the latter—and no amount of additional information may sway that view.[4] If the United States must indeed overcome what President Barack Obama calls a "trust deficit" with the Afghan people in order to accomplish its mission there, these perceptions of American intent hold broader consequences. They will influence whether or not Afghans choose to support the counterinsurgency campaign roiling their country, support that Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal view as essential to their success.

In short, we live in a world where legitimacy and perceived intent, not just actions or raw capabilities, matter. As a result, our country needs to understand how others view our actions, effectively present our view of what we are doing and why, build relationships with opinion leaders, and create a climate of trust in which understanding and cooperation are more likely. This is what strategic public engagement is and should be for. Strategic communication should not be about gussying up unpopular policies for public consumption, trumpeting the superiority of America or American values, or making the United States more popular in opinion polls. It is not about the means—whether broadcasting or Web sites—but about aligning the means of public engagement to policy ends. Most importantly, it should advance strategic ends. The desire for tactical wins has produced strategic losses all too often, and in the process it has sullied the reputation of strategic communication. Paying Iraqi journalists to plant favorable news stories while at the same time arguing vociferously for independent media, for example, undermined both America's strategic credibility and its broader foreign policy interests in Iraq and the Middle East.

Voice of America reporter conducts interview with Afghanistan national

Voice of America

armed force and diplomacy must be bolstered by a comprehensive effort to engage publics, who confer legitimacy and tangible support

Objectives

Public engagement can be used to accomplish five key national security objectives.[5] First, the United States has a legitimate need to inform, engage, and shape foreign

public opinion in support of specific policies. A key requirement is simply to provide quick and accurate information about what U.S. policies and actions actually are (as opposed to what our opponents say they are). Though knowing our policies may not lead to loving them, it is also the case that pure misstatements of fact about American policies abound. It is in our interest to correct them and help foreign audiences see where and how our interests are aligned with theirs. Highlighting areas where interests overlap is an equally important element of public engagement. If foreign publics see how and when their own interests and values are advanced by cooperation, our public engagement strategies can facilitate win-win outcomes.

Second, it is in U.S. national interest for foreign opinion leaders and mass publics to understand *America*, including its institutions, values, and people in all its national complexity. Contrary to common belief, the goal of such actions is not primarily to increase the appeal and attractive power of America (though that is a nice side benefit) but rather to help foreigners place information about the United States in proper context. For instance, Muslim societies need to understand how to weigh the statements by the President versus xenophobic talk show hosts versus law enforcement officials versus Hollywood actors. All of them represent America, but not all of them represent official U.S. policy or even majority opinion. The ability to understand our vibrant marketplace of ideas, and the fact that the loudest or most extreme voices are not always the most representative, adds valuable perspective without distorting the truth.

the goal is to help foreigners place information about the United States in proper context

Third, the United States needs to create a climate of mutual understanding, respect, and trust in which cooperation is more feasible. That requires building relationships not only with current and future leaders, but also between civilians and military leaders, and between military and government leaders and key counterparts in the nonprofit and private sectors. Military-to-military exchanges and young leaders programs have been doing this productively for years, but these efforts need to be expanded and reconceptualized to meet current and future challenges.

Fourth, U.S. national interests are well served when foreign publics embrace values that Americans also share—for instance, support for free markets, representative governance, environmental protection, and the illegitimacy of suicide bombing. We also have a strong moral interest in the promotion of human rights and opposition to scourges such as human trafficking and slavery. The United States has long encouraged the spread of these values, whether through official government actions or indirect support for exchanges and visitor programs, private partnerships, and grants for capacity-building for foreign individuals and organizations.

Fifth, American national security benefits from the strengthening of dense networks of personal relationships between current and future societal leaders, which open channels of communication, create

Marine speaks with residents of Betaka while surveying river for proposed bridge in Helmand Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (James A. Burks)

opportunities for collaboration, and facilitate the achievement of common goals. The U.S. relationship with China looks profoundly different than it did 30 years ago thanks to an extensive commitment to build military, educational, scientific, governmental, and business relationships. Though U.S.-China relations are complex and hardly free of conflict or contention, our worldviews are undoubtedly far closer together than they would have been without this web of relationships and the large cadre of Chinese leaders who have studied or spent significant time in the United States. Though it is difficult to quantify the number of conflicts averted by these relationships, both China scholars and government leaders attest to this fact. If the United States began now to build the same fabric of relationships with the Arab world that we now have with China, in 30 years perhaps that relationship would be transformed as well.

Ways

Achieving these objectives will be far easier if the United States is viewed as a credible actor on the world stage. To protect America's moral authority as well as the trust and even power that authority conveys, American policies should be in line with our highest ideals. They must be constructed to advance U.S. interests, taking into account the full range of costs and benefits, including foreign public opinion and its implications. As General McChrystal has observed about the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, "You're going to have to convince people, not kill them. Since 9/11, I have watched as America tried to first put out this fire with a hammer, and it doesn't work."[6]

To engage foreign publics effectively, it is imperative to understand them. Our goal should be to listen and understand foreign cultures and societies, how people communicate, which voices they trust, where they get their information, and why. We should recognize that others do not see the world as we do and may interpret our words or actions in ways we never intended. We should also recognize the diversity of foreign audiences and tailor the means of engagement to the task at hand.

Though much of today's discussion about strategic communication is focused on combating violent extremists and rebuilding relations with predominantly Muslim societies, our strategic aperture should be wider. American public diplomacy in the Cold War focused at least as much on pulling allies closer as it did on countering enemies. That is a lesson worth relearning today. The United States needs the support of European allies to counter Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, pursue pirates off the coast of Somalia, and bolster Pakistan against extremists. We need our allies in Japan and South Korea to help us manage the threat posed by North Korea. In all of these cases, the support of publics in allied nations is crucial.

Finally, the United States could be far more effective at engaging respected voices outside of the government and military. Whether they are found in universities, nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, the scientific community, or diaspora groups, these voices hold the potential to build new relationships and change minds in communities where official U.S. spokespeople never could.

Methods

The United States should employ a wide variety of means appropriate to the place, time, audience, and objective. Social networking technologies may be the best means to reach Egypt's Facebook-loving youth, but radio may be more appropriate to Afghanistan's less literate, less connected population. An interview on a Southeast Asian equivalent of MTV may be the right venue to spark dialogue in one instance, but a serious news interview may be more suitable in another. A senior U.S. Government spokesperson may be the most persuasive voice on one occasion. On another, a Pakistani scientist may be more effective. A well-timed speech today may impact opinion tomorrow, with effects lasting for days or weeks. The relationships and mutual understanding gained through military and educational exchanges take longer to bear fruit, but may have more enduring impact.

The available tactics are countless, involving town hall meetings or broadcasts, flyers or Web sites, dialogues or speeches, or photos or books. Many of these tactics are tried and true, long used by the United States in support of national security policies. They must be adapted to new purposes. But new methods are also necessary, as the United States and likeminded partners compete for attention and legitimacy in the midst of an information maelstrom.

The final step in getting back to basics is to reintegrate strategic public engagement into a broader national security strategy. Presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to John Kennedy to Ronald Reagan understood the need to engage foreign publics in concert with diplomatic, economic, and military means. Although these Presidents served in different times, that fundamental philosophy remains sound. The challenge—and opportunity—today is to engage all of these instruments and more. It is to engage partners from around the world and from a wide variety of backgrounds, along with America's government and armed forces, to achieve desired goals. As the scholar and newly appointed director of policy planning at the Department of State, Anne-Marie Slaughter, notes, power in today's world derives from connectivity.[7] The ability to engage others, in pursuit of common objectives, is now a potent means to achieve American national interests. This connectivity, in pursuit of national objectives, is the ultimate purpose of strategic public engagement. Using it wisely will require us to get back to basics, in words as well as deeds. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Michael Mullen, "Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4th Quarter, October 2009).

[2] Kristin M. Lord, John A. Nagl, and Seth D. Rosen, *Beyond Bullets: A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat Violent Islamist Extremism* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2009).

[3] Marc Lynch, "Mullen's Strategic Communication," Foreign Policy.com, August 30, 2009.

[4] Pamela Constable, "After Rescue, Recriminations," *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2009.

[5] For a discussion, see Kristin M. Lord, *Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, November 2008).

[6] Peter Spiegel, "Commander Maps New Course in Afghan War," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2009.

[7] Anne-Marie Slaughter, "America's Edge," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January-February 2009).