

Operational Communication in Stabilization Operations

Mastering the Time Factor: a Challenge

Operational Communication¹ general principles and rules, as they are defined in the joint doctrine document dated July 2001, keep all their relevance **within stabilization operations' framework**. However these operations' specificities impose that some adjustments should be made in order to be able to fully respond to the assigned objectives. **Mastering the time factor constitutes the Operational Communication' major challenge**.

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insignificant and could disturb national and international opinion as well as local populations which are seeking for rapid and blatant results that would correspond to the efforts that have been undertaken and to the possible human losses. Resorting to force presents then a risk to provoke public indignation in front of what is regarded as being a step backward. **The media have less interest for stabilization**, but excesses, errors and situations where the force appears to be powerless will be rapidly reported and analyzed by the media; whereas the opponents, who are now well trained at using Information

The media context

The rather good harmony that may exist between operations and media during the initial phase of a high intensity engagement (clear delineation between political and strategic levels, unity of command, identifiable decision making networks, rapid and visible successes, enthusiasm of the populations, international approbation...) **tends to fade away during stabilization phase**. That phase where the parties get lastingly frozen, the public debate gets rapidly focused on the "stagnation" issue, and its corollaries related to interest, legitimacy, efficiency, and military action's human and financial cost. The progress achieved can then appear to be fragile and rather

warfare, won't hesitate to exploit these problems to legitimate their fight. **In that domain, an actual asymmetry in the information domain can be observed**, since the public opinions of engaged forces' contributing nations follow from a distance what's going on in the theater and according to a rhythm that is discontinuous and at a low level as long as there is no actual crisis, whereas the local population receives in permanence the propaganda emitted by the opponents.

Besides, during the stabilization phase, there is an increased number of actors involved (coalitions, international, regional and local institutions, governments, civilian society representatives,...) which makes

the visibility of the military actions get blurred each one acting according to his own logic, his own sensitivities, his own objectives including what regards information. Within that context, **Operational Communication risk to focus only on events having a negative impact** - indifference, tiredness, indignation - that can provoke a legitimate frustration from the part of the engaged forces.

The objectives

Operational Communication objectives consist principally in accompanying the forces' action in the field by contributing to gaining adhesion or at least neutrality and trust of the local population and elites, to get the national public opinion's support for a long and costly effort by convincing them of the action's legitimacy and usefulness. Operational Communication participates also in maintaining the morale of the forces which are engaged in accomplishing tasks that are complex and sometimes not very much gratifying, by promoting their actions; they also fight back disinformation operations that aim at downgrading the forces' credibility and participate in asserting our country's role. Relying on the **classical four domains of action**³, Operational Communication aims at **targetting various types of public:** local population and authorities, engaged military forces and their environment (families, homebase populations,...) national and international public opinion, French and foreign political and military decision-makers, international organizations, potential opponents.

The principles

In order to achieve the above described objectives, it is important that tactical, operational and strategic levels commanders get heavily involved in the **implementation of a proactive type of communication which enables them to master the time factor in the long term**. This implies, on the one hand, to implement a continuous information effort aiming at mobilizing and maintaining the public opinions' support, and on the other hand to implement a permanent anticipation process in order to be able to pre-empt and face any crisis; and last it requires the development of a full coordination with all parties involved in the stabilization process. Operational Communication in stabilization tends **to get closer to an institutional type of information**.

It is essential first to regularly, frequently and systematically explain the legitimacy and reality of the action that is being conducted, what are the motives for it, its objectives, its effects, its modalities, its legal framework. Media interest must be incited and maintained. In order to do that, one has to use conviction, seduction, imagination, and surprise through striking the minds and keeping the dissemination of information at a rather high tempo. French Maréchal de Lattre, as soon as he had been assigned to Indochina, understood well that it was necessary to widen the scope of the conflict's exposure to the media in order to downgrade the public opinion's indifference and to gain its concurrence⁴.

It is, in particular, a question of **making the target audience understand that a strategy aiming at reaching lasting stability and prosperity, requires patience, determination and often firmness**. The objective remains to convince it that the desired end state is much preferable to what existed before so that the force doesn't appear as being an occupation force responsible for the local populations' hardships and sufferings. Our messages' credibility in the long term relies mainly on simplicity, sincerity and invariability, and also on a permanent effort of pedagogy, accuracy and openness. But that effort must always remain compatible with operational security requirements⁵. That type of **Operational Communication** consists in proactively offering information, rather than responding to requests, by providing the journalists with means to go on-site and to do their job, by opening them the doors to units and staffs, by providing them with information that is trustable and updated, by explaining successes and failures, by feeling obligated to tell the truth. Information must, in particular, make sure that it **shows precisely the diversity and complexity of all the daily tasks that are performed by the force, favoring presentations made by field actors**, and involving the various echelons of the chain of command in order to give realistic and concrete view of the action and to give value to their engagement and their knowledge of the environment. In order to achieve that objective, CIMIC actions, which constitute a high value leverage means must receive the highest support possible. This is the condition for making disappear any doubts about the force's action especially when stabilization process appears to be going slower due to reasons that can be more of political than a military nature and even sometimes that might originate from the renouncement of a State to take responsibilities.

That sort of proactivity must be accompanied by a **willingness to anticipate and to react** which requires the taking into account of the media factor by the chain of command during the planning and conduct of each of the actions that are undertaken. Operational Communication must first aim at convincing the target audience that military means have the deterring coercion capability and, although these assets are progressively fading, they are often the only ones being capable to face a downgrading situation and the resurrect of violence by neutralizing, if required, the potential perturbing elements. It is thus necessary to **remind that the military action's prime objective remains to be able to impose our will, and if necessary through the use of force**. In addition, Communication must be able to pre-empt any event and to keep the initiative in case of a crisis. In that respect, Operational Communication must be trustable and responsive in order to be the first source able to provide information that clearly and accurately explain what is the crisis about and aim at making accepted the employment of force. The use of force cannot appear as being due to disarray but rather to a firm and constant resolve. It must thus be anticipated in order to be able to demonstrate its legitimacy and that the risks taken by our forces are justified and that a particular attention is given to mastering the violence and to avoiding collateral damages, topics which are particularly sensitive for local, national and



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international public opinions. In that respect, the planning process **must include the “image” factor which has now become indispensable** in order to provide indisputable evidences to render credible the developed thesis⁶.

And last, **Operational Communication must necessarily be coordinated and organized in concert with all other local, national and international actors’** information campaigns in order to avoid releasing contradictory messages and thus being detrimental to the international action’s overall consistency. They must emphasize the complementarity that exists between the force and all other military and civilian actors operating in the field **by showing that the military component is the one that makes things possible for the others**. In the theater, the sought efficiency requires a close coordination with the coalitions various contingents, the national diplomatic representation, the international institutions’ missions operating in the field and the local administration representatives. At the national

level, it requires an interministerial co-ordination indispensable to create a synergy of the efforts which would be capable of relaying at strategic and political levels the proactive type of communication that is implemented in the field.

1 A command responsibility actions coordination, subsidiarity, willingness to inform, accuracy, proactivity, reactivity, respect of freedom of thought and of freedom of expression.

2 Joint Operations Planning and Command & Control Center.

3 Media, internal information, internet, network communication.

4 “This war, we are going to show them what it is all about, and the French will thus tell us if they want to continue it or not”.

5 Most journalists understand well that some pieces of information cannot be released to them.

6 All opponents are now capable of producing and rapidly disseminating their own images.

The respect of these conditions in the long term constitutes a difficult and demanding challenge. However this is the price to pay for our Communication organization to be recognized as being the source capable to **deliver information that is legitimate, comprehensive, relevant, up to date, and accurate in front of our opponents’ adverse messages, and to thus participate in the mission’s execution**.