From mindwar to engagement:
strategic communication as geopolitics

Cezar M. Ornatowski

San Diego State University, United States of America

Abstract

Strategic Communication involves high-level coordination of national policies and principles and their advancement through synchronized messaging and action from the diplomatic to the tactical level. While the concept of Strategic Communication represents a long-term and deliberate move toward increased use of "soft power," recent interest in it has been motivated by a growing realization that victory in the current conflict depends on influence and perception management rather than kinetic force. As a rhetorical techne, Strategic Communication continues the "missionary" tradition in American foreign policy of casting policy principles in terms of universal values, while becoming, at the tactical level, a dynamic intercultural interface where such principles are rendered into culturally appropriate terms and uptake as feedback up the chain of command. In this way, Strategic Communication makes the capacity to absorb and adapt the discourses and resources of other cultures a necessary function of the strategic projection of "soft power" in the effort to shape the values of the emerging global community.

Keywords: strategic communication, soft power, rhetoric, influence, warfare, hegemony

> "The greatest effect is achieved . . . by being what we wish to seem."
>
> Cicero, *On Duties*, Book II, 44

Introduction and background: what is strategic communication?

In his influential 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph Nye observed that "political leaders have spent little time thinking about how the nature of power has changed [with globalization and the spread of global communication technologies] and, more specifically, about how to incorporate the soft dimensions into their strategies for wielding power" (1). Nye defined "power" as "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants" (2), while "soft power" as ""getting others to want the outcomes that you want" (5). Soft power "co-opts people rather than coerces them" and "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (5). In an increasingly information-driven and networked world, Nye argued, politics "becomes in part a competition for attractiveness, legitimacy, and credibility," with a corresponding increase in the importance of soft power (31).

These, in fact, are the basic assumptions behind Strategic Communication (SC). SC is based on the realization that "the 'soft' power of persuasion and influence is as central to [the] achievement of national goals as any 'kinetic' effort" (Cornish et al 8). SC represents the next step in America's "strategic recognition that power [is] inherent in competitive persuasive activities," to echo Craig Hayden's characterization of the reason for the post-World War 2 move

by the U.S. into international communication (230), an expression of what Amir Dia has called the "growing interlink between 'information' and 'power'" in a world characterized by the 24-hour news cycle and saturated with electronic media (382).

The recent interest in SC has been fuelled by the experiences of the "war on terror" and the "asymmetrical warfare," which challenge traditional conceptions of armed conflict. Since under such conditions it is no longer possible to contain conflict geographically or win it by military means alone; conflicts need to be contained politically (Kaldor). "In modern warfare," the *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication* declares, "*all* activities are communication activities" (P-7). Already in February 2006, the U.S. Defense Department's *Quadrennial Defense Review* report to Congress concluded that "victory in the long war ultimately depends on strategic communication by the United States and its international partners."

Rather than a standing doctrine, SC at this point represents a dynamic and still evolving framework for deliberate and coordinated integration of considerations of symbolic meaning into the four dimensions of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economic (DIME). The U.S. *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines SC as "[f]ocused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power" (24). Although it is one of many definitions of SC that have been advanced, it captures the essential elements that most of them have in common: high-level coordination of national policies and principles and their advancement through synchronized messaging and action from the diplomatic to the tactical level.

The purpose of the present discussion is to examine SC as a fundamentally rhetorical enterprise (although "rhetoric" is not mentioned among the many sources of inspiration for SC, nor are rhetoric scholars as such mentioned among the experts consulted). I regard SC as a rhetorical *techne*: a coherent system (at least in theory) for what in effect amounts to the rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, articulation, and delivery of national policy. At the "high" level of policy principles, SC continues the Wilsonian, missionary tradition in American foreign policy of casting policy principles in terms of (putatively) universal values. Although in its overall cast SC appears hegemonic, at the tactical level it becomes a dynamic intercultural interface where policy principles and operational themes are rendered into culturally appropriate terms and uptake as feedback up the chain of command. In this way, SC has been developing the capacity to absorb and adapt the discourses and resources of other cultures in its efforts to shape the values of the emerging global community. I end by suggesting that under the conditions of increasing global interconnectivity and mobility, "soft power," to be effective, needs to be adaptable and responsive to the needs, traditions, and discourses of—in effect to successfully absorb—other cultures (understanding that "culture" is itself a dynamic rhetorical achievement).

Discussion

What is "strategic" about strategic communication?

SC is "strategic" in three senses. In the first sense, it is based on "a synoptic regard seeing each part relative to the whole" (Lawrence 163). As such, SC aims at developing and articulating an "internally coherent strategy" (Kahl and Lynch 50). SC is also "strategic" in that it regards communication as "interest-guided action," utilitarian, "purposive-rational" action "oriented to the actor's success" (Habermas 41). Finally, SC is "strategic" in representing a "calculus (or the manipulation) of relations of force which becomes possible whenever a subject of will and

power (a business enterprise, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (De Certeau 5).

Strategic communication as rhetorical *techne*

SC is both a process (not unlike quality assurance) and a capability (Paul). At the top level, policy is formulated through interagency consensus and embodied in a set of high-level declarative principles. The principles are in turn rendered, through a process referred to as "nesting," into "themes" and "messages" at, respectively, operational and tactical levels, with the return loop closed through surveillance, intelligence, interviews with local informants, and other forms of information gathering and "feedback" (as the Department of Defense 2009 *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept* document puts it, SC "involves listening as well as transmitting," 2). SC works through a process that resembles the rhetorical canons of invention (of appropriate policy principles), arrangement (strategic "composition" of the communication effort for a given purpose or in a given theater of operation), articulation or "style" (expression in culturally appropriate forms and idioms), and delivery (provision of information "products" delivered through a variety of media). In this manner, SC produces and constantly refines a "grand vision" underpinning foreign policy and renders it into "messages" (verbal and visual) and (symbolic) actions "on the ground" (including, if necessary, kinetic actions).

At the highest level, policy principles are articulated in terms of "general principles applicable to all mankind" (Kissinger 447), such as "security," "prosperity," "liberty," "justice" or "respect for human rights," In this, SC continues what Henry Kissinger calls the "missionary" tendency in American foreign policy. SC renders policy expressed in such terms into "messages" (verbal, visual, or action) at the tactical level. The *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication* defines "Communication Strategy" as "[a] joint force commander's strategy for coordinating and synchronizing themes, messages, images, and actions to support national level strategic communication- related objectives and ensure the integrity and consistency of themes and messages to the lowest tactical level" (39).

Seen in such terms, SC may be regarded is a *techne* (in a rhetorical sense) for the generation and projection of power in a globalizing world increasingly dependent on information and saturated with information technologies (both broadcasting and surveillance). *Techne* here means (to adapt Aristotle) a systematic application of principles derived from experience and observation (including, in SC's case, various forms of surveillance) in order to achieve desired (symbolic) effects. Although in its "strategic" aspects and as a techne SC has an Aristotelian cast (Michel De Certeau considers Aristotle's *Rhetoric* itself "strategic") SC is "Platonic" in terms of regarding symbolic/rhetorical action as but one of the tools for advancing broader political ("philosophical") ends--the other tools including (as in Plato's *Republic*) deception (Macdonald), psychological manipulation (Forest), and the use of force.

To avoid the temptation to dismiss SC as simply another manifestation of "empire," one must bear in mind that the U.S. and its allies are not the only ones developing doctrines of global strategic influence through "soft" power. SC has thus to be seen in the larger context of competing visions for the "hearts and minds" of the emerging global community.

China, for example, has a long tradition of influence warfare, dating back at least to Sun Tzu. Similarly to Anglo-American SC, the Chinese assume that in the near future "the main form of psychological warfare will be contests for public opinion" (Thomas 5). Chinese conceptions also integrate the dimension of "influence" into all instruments of national power, as well as blur the distinctions between strategic, operational, and tactical levels. For the Chinese, "[t]he highest strategic objective in psychological warfare is achieved by changing a country's fundamental social concepts and its society's sense of values" (Thomas 5), which makes one wonder about

any the room for "dialog" with other cultures. And unlike U.S. and British versions of SC, Chinese PSYWAR is not explicitly declared as being waged in the interests of "democracy," "freedom," or "universal values" (the good faith and ultimate "truth" of such declarations is another matter, but words do matter, if only because one may be held responsible for them, which certainly is the case with American SC). In addition, as Timothy Thomas notes based on theses advanced explicitly by Chinese authors, Marxist theory opposes peaceful evolution (Thomas 6).

Hegemony, as Raymond Williams has argued, "is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. (…) Moreover … it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, re-created, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice." (112-3)

If SC is hegemonic, it is also dynamic. To be effective at the "lowest tactical level," "messages" must consider local cultural, historical, and linguistic context. At this level, where failure to "communicate" or understand what is being conveyed or implied may be a matter of life or death, "strategic" communication turns personal, with "audience" as "partner" and with emphasis on relationship building, "engagement," "truth," "trust," "credibility," and matching "words and deeds" (see, for example, Mullen). "We need to understand the people and see things through their eyes," declared General Stanley McChystal." "It is their fears, frustrations, and expectations that we must address" (quoted in the *Commander's Handbook*, III-20). The U.S. Army in fact uses the term "strategic communication" at the strategic level, "commander's communication strategy" at the operational level, and "information engagement" at the tactical level (*Commander's Handbook*).

While it is easy to see "engagement" a mere cover for hegemony, at the level of tactics "influence"—regardless of the original intent--shades into what is in effect intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning conducted, perhaps paradoxically but not without a certain historical logic, along the "edges" of war (since history proceeds dialectically and dialectic is implicit in conflict). The fact that this kind of "dialog" influences even the higher, operational and even policy, levels is shown by the evolution over time of the United States "narrative" of the current conflict, from the "war on terror" to "Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism" and, more recently, to "Struggle for Global Security and Progress" (Ornatowski).

Conclusion: strategic rhetoric as geopolitics

In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, a military white paper entitled "From PSYOP to MindWar: The Psychology of Victory" (originally written in 1980 and revived in 2003 with an introduction by the original author), suggested that the Vietnam war had been lost not by the U.S. militarily but psychologically on the home front. To forestall such a situation in the future, the paper proposed the concept of "MindWar": "a type of war which is fought . . . in the minds of the national populations involved" (Valley 4-5). The "main effort" in any conflict, the paper suggested, "must originate at the national level. It must strengthen our national will to victory and it must attack and ultimately destroy that of the enemy." MindWar is "deliberate in that it is a planned, systematic, and comprehensive effort involving all levels of activity from the strategic to the tactical" (5). "In its strategic context, MindWar must reach out to friends, enemies, and neutrals alike across the globe … through the media possessed by the United States which have the capabilities to reach virtually all people on the face of the Earth" (7). These media "are, of course, **electronic** media—television and radio" (7, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, "it must be axiomatic of MindWar that it **always** speaks the truth. It power lies in its ability to focus recipients' attention on the truth of the **future** as well as that of the present. MindWar thus

involves the stated promise of the truth that the United States has resolved to make real if it is not already so" (7).

The concept of MindWar bears striking resemblances to SC. However, the distance between MindWar and SC can be measured by the distance between the means of delivery of the former, television and radio, and the diffuse, decentered, networked global media that constitute the world of the latter.

The real question is perhaps not whether SC is or is not "hegemonic," but what kind of rhetoric, connected to what values, is going to shape the emerging global community?

In her review of the influence and spread of Greek rhetoric in Rome, Joy Connoly suggests that after the territorial expansion of the Republic, "rhetoric offered Roman culture the discursive resources to meet the challenge of empire." Rhetoric became "a discipline for the new world order" defined by the expansion of Roman civilization (141). It may be argued that SC also represents a "discipline" (understood in a Foucauldian sense) for a new world order defined by the global expansion of both Western, post-Enlightenment conceptions of democracy (with the political and cultural pressures this creates) and information technologies that enhance the ability of groups, networks, movements, and individuals to influence the course of affairs.

Strategy, according to De Certeau, "postulates a *place* susceptible of being circumscribed as a *propre* and of being the base from where relations can be administered with *an exteriority* of targets or threats (clients or competitors, enemies, the countryside surrounding the city, the objectives and objects of research, etc.)" (5). "All 'strategic' rationalization," De Certeau suggests, "begins by distinguishing its 'appropriate' place from an 'environment,' that is, the place of its own power and will" (5). De Certeau suggests that the establishment of an "autonomous" place represents a "victory of place over time" and permits a "transformation of strange forces into objects which one can observe and measure," thus control, in a gesture by which seeing becomes also foreseeing (5). Such knowledge is tantamount to the "capacity to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces" (5). The "precondition of this knowledge," however, De Certeau suggests, is power (6).

SC transforms potential uncertainties into readable spaces by articulating them according to an overarching "vision," at once "seeing" and "foreseeing," controlling its objects and delivering them, when necessary, to more kinetic forces. In SC's case, power is both a precondition (as military power) and a *result* (as political power) of such knowledge.

Seen from this perspective, SC emerges as a *dunamis*: a dynamic fulfillment of a potentiality implicit in both global military and economic power (of the United States) and the interconnectivity and penetration of communication technologies. As the U.S. has been learning over the last decade, this "soft" power of SC critically depends, however, on successful absorption, appropriation, and integration of the discursive and symbolic resources of other cultures.

Address correspondence to: ornat@mail.sdsu.edu

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