Military Strategic Communication at the Tactical Level in Counterinsurgency Operations: The case of Sweden in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Denna artikel undersöker implementeringen av strategisk kommunikation på de lägre nivåerna av den militära organisationen (den taktiska nivån). Den strategiska kommunikationen på den taktiska nivån är ett underutforskat område då existerande forskning fokuserar på den strategisk nivå och på de strategiska narrativen. Det fall som studeras här är den svenska insatsen i Afghanistan 2012–2013. Resultaten visar att befälhavare på alla nivåer kan vara kommunikatörer. Resultaten visar även att en kognitiv splittring existerar när det gäller uppfattningen av kommunikatörens roll. Å ena sidan anser sig de flesta inom manöverförbanden inte ha en viktig roll att spela när det gäller att sända meddelanden. Samtidigt visar studien på en acceptans hos samma personer att de själva har en betydande effekt på värderingar och attityder hos den lokala befolkningen. Trots detta synliggör resultaten att man på den taktiska nivån ofta distanserar sig från kommunikatörens uppgifter och menar att dessa uppgifter är andra enheter eller personals ansvar. Studien visar även på flera svårigheter som hindrar genomförandet av den strategiska kommunikationen på ett effektivt sätt. De mest framträdande områdena är motsägelser i meddelanden på grund av skyddsåtgärder för de egna enheterna (force protection) och brist på synkronisering.

THIS STUDY AIMS to investigate the implementation of strategic communication within a military context. This is important since in the field of information engagements in the military arena little research has focused on the lower segments of the military hierarchy, as the focus tends to be on the strategic level and strategic narratives. This article will focus primarily on the experiences of communicating strategically on the lower segment of the military hierarchy (the tactical level), pursuing a bottom-up approach during the Swedish Armed Forces 2012–2013 rotation in Afghanistan.

The findings show that commanders at all levels can be communicators. While most do not think of themselves as having an important role to play in sending messages, the study shows an acceptance that the manoeuvre forces themselves have a significant effect on the shaping of beliefs and attitudes of the local population. Nevertheless, the findings reveal that those at the tactical level often distance themselves from the communicator tasks, arguing that those tasks are the responsibility of other units or personnel. The results thus indicate a cognitive split in the perception of the communicator's role. Furthermore, the study reveals several obsta-

cles that hamper communicating strategically in an effective manner. The most prominent areas are contradictions in messages due to force protection measures and lack of synchronisation.-

It is recommended that commanders need to ensure that subordinates understand the valuable role manoeuvre forces play in shaping the beliefs and attitudes in the area of operations. There is also a need for higher operational levels to affirm that the lower-tier units not only have some leeway in the shaping of messages but are also provided with a type of mandate to negotiate.

Introduction[1]

In the last decades, the world has undergone an information technology revolution and continues to do so today.[2] This fundamental change has central effects on how parties wage war and can pose serious security challenges. An increasing level of attention is being paid to controlling the narrative of the battlespace. Narrative meaning is shaping the conceptions of acts, outcomes and contingencies.[3] In the context of irregular warfare, the framing of issues and possible responses to them become even more crucial. There is a focus shift from that which tactical commanders understand, such as conventional fire and manoeuvre, to trying to undermine the narratives that the enemies promote or base their appeal upon.[4]

One could argue that in each conflict, there is an ongoing battle in the arena of information between the combating sides. This idea is not new, military philosophers like Sun Tzu emphasised the weight of information in battle long ago, but it has been accentuated anew by the information technology revolution. What seems evident is that some military objectives cannot be solely pursued through the traditional use of force. Instead,

military forces need to focus on integrating different outlets to frame the discussion and to position themselves within it. It is essential that communication is deliberate and thought-through, rather than reactive and short-sighted. A strategy is needed to shape the behaviours and attitudes in the area of operations, as well as in the international or domestic perception of the conflict. In response to this conundrum, different ideas of information engagements have appeared in the military context.

The authors argue that in the field of information engagements in the military arena, certain perspectives are missing. Firstly, little research has focused on the manoeuvre forces' experience of sending messages in the field. The focus tends to be on the strategic level and the strategic narratives, mainly on the overarching narrative rather than on its implementation in the field, tend to be vague, with overarching guidance that there should be a red thread running between the strategic level and the field implementation.[5] If we accept that these forces are the ones that predominantly shape the perception of an international force locally, it is essential to investigate the tactical segments' experience of sending messages. It is thus important to explore how messages and themes are implemented in the tactical chain of command, and what problems in execution can be identified in the low level, non-specialised manoeuvre forces.

To fill this gap, this article will investigate information engagement in the context of strategic communication at the lower segment of the military hierarchy (the tactical level, here defined as stretching from the Commanding Officer (CO) of the Swedish force down to the junior leaders of the field (section commanders) (also see "Research design" below). By doing so, this study furthers our knowledge about not only how

manoeuvre forces contribute to the implementation of strategic messages and how this contribution is achieved, but also to research on strategic communication by adding knowledge of strategic communication at the tactical level.

Strategic communication, very much like the other concepts, is contested and suffers from intellectual ambiguity. Here the concept is preliminarily defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission", a definition that falls within the basic consensus in the wider academic community.[6] Strategic communication, which covers a considerable span of activities and different organisational levels, is also affected by the intellectual discussion's bias towards higher organisational levels.[7] And at times while doing so, misguided conclusions are drawn about the lower level troops without proper insight into them.[8] In addition to the tendency of the academic debate to focus on the strategic level, it also seems to primarily stress communicative outlets via psychological operations such as the use of trained groups, flyers, or radio broadcasts.[9] Relevant as it is to interview IO-officers or to analyse PSYOP-messages from leaflets and billboards in order to understand how military forces seek to affect the information environment, what of the significant dissemination executed by 'ordinary' soldiers and officers?

Some rightly argue that the manoeuvre forces should be seen as a capability in strategic communication, due to their ability to influence through actions.[10] However, it is also apparent that the lower echelons of the tactical hierarchy, such as patrolling infantry units, are those predominately in contact with the local population on a broader scale. They are not only present through their physical visibility but also through interaction. Thus the manoeuvre forces, i.e. the lower-ranked

officers and soldiers, can be argued to be those most likely to affect the sentiments of that audience at large.

The article will focus on the role of small states' manoeuvre forces, using the Swedish Armed Forces deployment in Afghanistan during its 2012–2013 rotation (Fortsättningsstyrka [Rotational force] FS 24) as a case study. Small states will of course never be able to compete fully with large states – including in strategic communication. However, small states are active participants in many international operations, and thus despite often being one of many minor partners, their strategic communication is important especially on the local level where the manoeuvre forces are the ones in most close contact with the local population. This is so in particular in a case like the one chosen here, as in this so-called Peace Support Operation some of the countries, including Sweden, got responsibility in a set area as a so-called Provincial Reconstruction team (PRT).[11] It is, of course, difficult to know what exactly the differences are between different small states; thus there are limits to what generalisations can be drawn from the study of one state in one case, as well as between cases. However, if nothing else, lessons can be drawn and mistakes avoided by understanding and studying previous experiences, and furthermore, it is expected that similar challenges have been met by different states on the local level.

The question asked is *how the tactical level was used as a communicator of strategic messages in* the FS24 rotation in Afghanistan. This study is limited to the Swedish Armed Forces 2012–2013 rotation (Fortsättningsstyrka [Continuation force] FS 24). This particular rotation was chosen as it took place after 2010 which was the year that ISAF changed its approach to one of counterinsurgency with an emphasis on winning

'hearts and minds'. Thus, as the ambition is to map out the strategic communication usage, and to enhance understanding of the tactical aspects, it is relevant to investigate a period in which the physical footprint and willingness to communicate were evident. Lastly, the Swedish contribution significantly decreased after this rotation.

Strategic communication in a complex area of operations like Afghanistan 2012–2013, of course, comes with challenges relating to the sender – members of the international manoeuvre force – and the recipient – a local population caught in the middle of two fighting forces. In short, the study of strategic communication at the tactical level in an active operation is somewhat different from other research on civilian organisations and agencies (also see research design).

The study is not only relevant in the military domain but other fields as well. The research on strategic communication in, for example, economics and management research often focuses on goals, outcomes and higher organisational levels, leaving the micro-level neglected.[12] This tendency is equally visible when turning to the military context; few reports focus on the tactical level and the relevant experiences. The few communications that are unclassified and available to the public tend to be experience reports by high-ranking officers rather than follow-up data from lower-tier units.[13] Thus, there is clearly a hole to be filled, as strategic communication is in practice implemented by lower-tier units, who are responsible for executing strategic communication on the ground.

The article is organised into four parts. In the first part, a review of the field, a conceptual discussion on the idea of information engagements is conducted with a focus on strategic communication. This discussion is followed by a section on strategic commu-

nication in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces and a discussion on organisational levels in strategic communication. Finally, forces move to strategic communication at the tactical level. The second part outlines the research design, outlining the chosen analytical approach, data collection and sampling procedures. Thereafter the article moves on to the empirical part, where the findings of the case study are presented. Finally, in part four, conclusions are drawn, and policy recommendations are made.

Review of the field

This article focuses on strategic communication. For the purpose of this article, Christopher Paul's definition is used, defining strategic communication as the "coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives [italics in original]".[14] However, strategic communication is just one of several concepts available to those wishing to apply a label to the idea of information engagements, and many of them tend to blur. Information operations, psychological operations, military information support operations, propaganda, framing operations, influence operations, perception management and strategic communication are only a few of the concepts used. Even though this problem was pointed out many years ago, more recent investigations still emphasise that "little progress has been made in the area of doctrine integration and harmonization".[15] Not only is this a problem in the conceptual world, experience reports indicate that the overall field of information engagements in the military context tends to be highly ambiguous and that there is considerable confusion of roles. The American experience, for example, indicates confusion,

not only in the Department of Defense but "especially in the field, because the terms SC, IO and PSYOP (now Military Information Support Operations [MISO]) are frequently used interchangeably".[16]

What then, are information engagements? As noted above, many different labels are circulating in the academic community. Some tend to emphasise the same ideas but under different headings. The concept of information operations, for example, stretches between a wide range of capabilities such as electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception and operational security. Some argue that the concept has been so broadly applied that "it has become the common term to describe the process of using information to influence".[17] In Afghanistan, the Combined Forces Command started a unit called Theater wide Interagency Effects which was supposed to synchronise "Public Affairs (PA), PSYOP, IO and political-military operations".[18] The unit providing the same type of support in Iraq was on the other hand known as the Strategic Communications Office.[19]

As described above, information operations as a concept encompass many different functions, and can thus be regarded as an umbrella term. NATO views IO as "a military function to provide advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries… in support of alliance mission objectives".[20] The doctrine further states that it can be performed by any actor, but that tactical level information operations should focus on "creating an effect on key local decision-makers and groups by affecting their will, decision-making processes and capability".[21] The Swedish Armed Forces basic

manual on Information Operations argues along the same lines. The manual states that "in order to coordinate players' information, both actions and messages, an information strategy is formulated".[22] It further emphasises that there should be a common thread from initiating directives to tactical orders to reaching planned effects. The American definition of IO was interestingly somewhat recently changed (2004), due to an earlier version placing too much emphasis on the core capabilities which caused confusion between utilising them compared to the integrating function of IO.[23] Clearly, some steps are taken in the right direction. Nonetheless, there still is confusion.

How do Public Affairs (PA) fit into this then? PA support the overall execution of information operations by coordinating efforts with other organisations and agencies to ensure themes and messages are consistent and deconflicted. Public affairs can thus be argued to represent an activity connected to and in support of information operations. However, some argue that the goals of the functions are entirely different. Public affairs are responsible for supplying the public with factual and truthful information. Information operations, on the other hand, seek to influence audiences in order to change perceptions or behaviours.[24]

Even though doctrine makes quite clear what the IO function should entail (the coordination of different capabilities and at the tactical level possibly Key Leader Engagement (KLE)), the term is frequently used as a synonym for psychological operations. Military personnel frequently avoid using PSYOP, probably because it has the stigma of propaganda due to its ambition to influence.[25] The US doctrine of PSYOP states its purpose: "to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to

U.S. national objectives".[26] This is done by "conveying selected information and/or advising on actions that influence the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign audiences". The doctrine does not seem to pinpoint the relation to conventional forces in any greater detail but merely concludes that "PSYOP forces support conventional forces and special operations forces". Some argue that every action of a military force in a conflict zone has a psychological impact and that PSYOP thus applies to the manoeuvre forces in the sense that "every infantryman is a PSYOP operator".[27]

However, if following the line of argument that every military action has a psychological impact and thus could be labelled PSYOP, we again lose some of the intellectual ground covered while committing to the conceptual debate on these issues. If every military action is viewed this way, is electronic warfare PSYOP due to its possible psychological effects? Are computer network operations PSYOP due to their possible psychological effects? No. In comparison to this, one could, on the other hand, argue that the different capabilities and their military actions function as strategic communicators. Viewed in this way, the capabilities do not lose their conceptual distinctness, and the manoeuvre forces are not reduced to a tool used by PSYOP. The authors of this article argue that the manoeuvre forces do not conduct PSYOP, they conduct tactical operations that might have a psychological impact, as well as a strategic effect, through the messages they send.

Whereas PSYOP and IO at least doctrinally are reasonably precise, strategic communication and IO overlap. An American senior analyst at the IO directorate, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, summarises the problem in the following way:

The distinction between SC and IO is blurred because, in its broadest sense, strategic communication involves the integration of issues of audience and stakeholder perception and response into policymaking, planning, and operations at every level. IO should be consistent with [U.S. government strategic communication] goals and objectives. Where DoD is the lead or a major means to achieve [U.S. government strategic communication] goals among a particular audience, IO efforts may become essentially SC efforts.[28]

It is thus clear that IO and strategic communication resemble each other to a large degree. What is then more applicable to the manoeuvre forces? The discussion above states that IO is the coordination of military information activities. The messages sent by troops can in this regard be argued to represent one aspect of IO. Thus, it is very similar to the definition of strategic communication as outlined above; one could argue the differences being a matter of semantics. However, if coupling IO and a conventional force one should, at least in line with doctrine, think of several different capabilities used along with force in pursuit of an objective. Whereas when linking strategic communication and a conventional force, one could argue that it more correctly describes what the article tries to show: how the tactical level communicates strategically through actions and words. Thus, strategic communication can be seen as stretching from the creation of policies in the Department of Defense down to a psychological operation officer's gathering and disseminating information in the field, or even a 'simple' infantry units' patrol in the field.

In the end, a soldier in an infantry platoon cares little if his or her paper sheet with talking points stems from the Strategic Communications Office at Regional Head-

quarters, from an IO-officer at brigade level or a PSYOP-officer at the battalion level, they will execute it just the same. Nevertheless, whichever label we apply, it is hard to disregard the importance these ground forces play. Moreover, if in line with military hierarchy, all efforts work in coherence with the top of the pyramid anyway.

Strategic communication in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces

While Sweden's role in Afghanistan has been subject to extensive research,[29] it does not cover the dimension of strategic communication. In fact, in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces before 2015, to the knowledge of the authors,' no publication mentions strategic communication. The term first appears as a term in a short section of the document "Strategic Direction for the Swedish Armed Forces 2015" [Försvarsmaktens Strategiska Inriktning 2015] in which the concept is not clearly defined but in essence, corresponds with many aspects of the text above.[30] The document states that messages "should be cohesive and coordinated from the strategic level to practical execution of communication activities".[31] The linkage between the strategic and the tactical level is thus pinpointed.

Interestingly, new terminology surfaces: "Military Strategic Communication" [Militärstrategisk kommunikation]. This term represents "coordination of words and deeds on a strategic and operational level", which is "to be an active part and multiplier of military activities in order to optimise desired effects".[32] This could indicate that some leeway is possible on the tactical level. All actions and words uttered do not have to be in strict correlation with operational and strategic objectives but rather the need for tactical flexibility and adapting to the situation at hand is acknowledged. Alternatively, strategic communication might not concern the tactical level. However, the text also makes clear that communication should be an "evident opening value in all military decisions, on all levels, to ensure that we do what we say and say what we do" and by doing this "act to retain all our target group's confidence".[33] The strategic military communication should further be consistent with the political will, and this should be reflected in the Swedish Armed Forces' operations and messages.

Organisational levels in strategic communication

In the military context, it is evident that the concept per se is not limited to a particular organisational level; it can encompass a wide range of activities. In order to clarify the focus of the article, it is necessary to break down the meta-phenomenon one step further into its different components. When deconstructing strategic communication, five different elements can be discerned.[34]

The first element, enterprise-level strategic communication, is of little importance here since it involves wide-ranging government activities. This applies to the second element, strategic communication planning, integration and the synchronisation processes as well. The second element relates to a set of activities in an inter-agency perspective that necessitates distinct organisation, procedures and personnel. The third element, however, communication strategies and themes, is closer to the essence of this study. This element involves both the "desired information effects (inputs) that planning processes will translate into communication goals and themes (outputs) and incorporate into plans. Content outputs, such as communication ob-

jectives and themes, are the elements that are integrated and synchronized across the joint force, especially to and for communication, information, and influence capabilities."[35]

The fourth element will constitute the focal point of this article: communication, information and influence capabilities. It involves "the broadcast dissemination, messaging, and engagement elements of strategic communication."[36] This component may include various levels: public affairs, psychological operations, defence support to public diplomacy, defined visual information and civil affairs. However, this essay will solely focus on the tactical military force elements: the manoeuvre forces. This part of strategic communication "might include the interactions of any element of the force with foreign populations [...] They might include every action or utterance of every deployed soldier, sailor, airman, and marine."[37] The last element concerns knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities and will not be reviewed in this article. This category incorporates media and target-audience analysis, social/historical expertise, and assessment capabilities.[38]

As shown, the deeper we delve into strategic communication, the wider it seems to become. It is clear that the concept involves several different organisational levels, which in turn correspond to one of the problems: coordination. "If every communicator has complete latitude without being bound by themes or guidance connecting messages to objectives, then many representatives would become loose cannon in the ship of communication".[39] Tools of influence, as well as different units within the manoeuvre force, thus need to work together for a complete realisation of the objective to take place. The opposite of synergy is known as "information fratricide" when one piece of information contradicts another. This severely impedes the overall effort of strategic communication.[40] Thus, when formulating strategic messages, the balance between flexibility and coordination must be considered.

However, coordination does not only involve having clear objectives, it also relates to the command and control structure. As stated previously, the information arena incorporates several different components that could support, or ruin, any strategic communication efforts. One could even broaden the perspective further, including non-military actors such as public diplomacy activities and private security companies. Furthermore, other functions that are present at the lowest tactical level, such as intelligence, have prominent interests in the information arena and provide vital support to operations. Coordination between these arenas do not happen by magic. An additional consideration is: who is really in charge here?

Strategic communication at the tactical level

There is very limited research on military strategic communication in relation to the executing aspect of the manoeuvre forces, such as junior officers and soldiers. It is unclear how units on the ground contribute to the strategic communication goals. Keeping in mind the elements stated above, one needs to ask, how do the low-level capabilities function and what is their relationship to other levels? This is the fragment missing in theory, at least when looking strictly at research relating to the military hierarchy. When widening our view from the military context, clues appear.

The principal-agency theory can help us pinpoint the relationship between levels of hierarchy given information asymmetries. Lower levels tend to know more about their tasks, whereas the higher levels may be more

focused on the objectives. This means the incentives of agents (lower levels) and principals (higher levels) are not always aligned.[41] This also is likely to be right in the military arena. If the higher-level military commanders lack competence in using the lower segments or just have a diverging view on how to employ them, the messages passing through the communicators will be disarrayed regardless of the effort expended.

The perceived role of communicators has been widely studied, showing an increased influence and new models for communication.[42] In this article a communicator will be viewed as a person who is able to convey or exchange information (Oxford Dictionary). Results of interest for understanding the role of communicators, and therein how the tactical level perceives itself, can be found in a study from 2014.[43] Most communicators view themselves as *facilitators* between the public and the organisation and as *speakers for the organisation*. The top managers' answers correspond to these results. This indicates homogeneity between the upper and lower levels of hierarchy regarding understanding the role of the lower-tier organisation elements. Besides the two aforementioned role categories, the study shows other types: the *representative* of interests, the *advisor* for the top management, the *inhouse journalist* and the *scout*. The scout is the "the listening aspect of communications, which includes monitoring public opinion and identifying threats and opportunities within stakeholder settings".[44] Top managers seemed to support advanced and strategic tasks in the advisor, interest-representing and scout roles to a lesser degree than their lower-level counterparts.[45]

This branch of research thus provides the study with six types of roles that can be attributed to communicators. This will serve as one of the study's contrasting stand-

points when analysing the empirical data. Nevertheless, one aspect that needs to be highlighted is that this framework was intended for communicators from the centre of an organisation, meaning professionals with specific schooling. In contrast, this current study will focus on the lowest tactical level within a military hierarchy, which, however, can be argued to incorporate a span of knowledge, stretching from young soldiers to experienced officers with university degrees. One thesis is that different communicator roles can be attributed to different levels in the tactical span.

Research design

A case study approach is used in this study and thus allows us to examine strategic communication in-depth, as the case study design "allows for conceptual refinements with a higher level of validity over a smaller number of cases".[46] The case studied, i.e. the Swedish Armed Forces 2012–2013 rotation in Afghanistan (FS24), how the tactical level was used as a communicator of strategic messages in the FS24 rotation is a case of a small state working within an international framework. This case was chosen because it provided unique access to information through gatekeepers in the author's network while at the same time it was unexplored. Other countries participating in international military crisis management encounter the same problems; thus, the Swedish case may offer insights of value also beyond the case itself and Sweden. The results can be seen, if not entirely comparable, as a good contrast to other small state nations working within similar international frameworks. Of course, as with all case studies, there is an inherent design problem relating to the ability to generalise the results.[47] However, the chosen design enables the study to find

new aspects of implementation, which is the purpose, being an explorative study.

More specifically, the study will investigate the lower segment of the military hierarchy, namely the tactical level, stretching from the Commanding Officer (CO) of the Swedish force down to the junior leaders of the field (section commanders) during the tour of 2012, FS24. By interviewing the tactical chain of commanders of the Swedish force, it is possible to outline how the lower-tier organisational element, the manoeuvre forces, operate with information engagements. Even though the battlespace owner (CO) is typically seen as a part of the operational level seeing as he/she coordinates and commands multiple capabilities rather than only tactical units, due to the small size of the Swedish force he/she also represents the highest tactical command with the company commanders directly subordinated.[48]

Within this context, it is asked how the tactical level was used as a communicator of strategic messages during the tour. In order to answer this question, the analysis will first shortly touch upon if the themes and messages can be argued to be strategic or not. The central aim will follow: investigating how the tactical level communicates. The study is explorative in its nature and pursues the higher aim of possibly uncovering difficulties in operationalising strategic communication while mapping out its usage. In essence, this is a study attempting to develop overall knowledge of the tactical execution of strategic communication.

Analytical approach

The research question was operationalised through logical reasoning, guided by previous research and strategic communication, to identify problems in implementation. For example, in order to understand how the

tactical level is used, it is necessary to understand who sends the messages and how these units' work. From the literature review, it appears that there is a fine line between freedom in phrasing and coordination in implementation, making it of interest to ask the informants of their experience in adapting messages and if they experienced any contrasting messages and/or actions. Lastly, in order to argue that the study is examining strategic communication, it is further crucial to study the messages themselves and their continuity. This has the benefit of revealing how the units view themselves and their communicator role when being asked the relevance of the messages.[49]

The different staffing categories were asked slightly different questions. This is because these two categories (officers and section commander/soldiers) have access to different spheres within the tactical level. It is unlikely that a soldier has the opportunity to read the full operation order from the CO or has the opportunity to take part in any discussions when receiving the orders from the higher command. Furthermore, it is difficult for the soldier to reveal how messages were coordinated higher up in the tactical chain. What the soldiers (section commanders) can share is their first-hand experience of talking to locals and spreading messages, which does not diminish their importance, but instead highlights their direct access to and contact with the audience as well as their disseminating role.

Being guided by an inductive logic the content analysis focuses on extracting new aspects or relations from existing data rather than proving or falsifying existing theories. To succeed coding is central. From the codes patterns and themes are discerned that thereafter can be clustered into meaningful conclusions concerning the material. This study adopts a six-step process based on Bruce L

Berg's structures of content analysis.[50] First, data is gathered and transcribed into texts (interview transcripts). Thereafter, the texts are coded with codes extracted from the data material. Thirdly, the codes are classified into categories or themes. Fourth, the data is sorted into the categories to reveal similar statements, patterns, correlations, similarities, and differences. Fifthly, the sorted data is investigated in order to identify meaningful patterns or processes. Finally, identified processes are considered in light of existing research and theories, and a small contribution of transferable knowledge is made. (Also see "Analysis and coding process" below.)

Thus, all interviews were transcribed into texts. Relevant parts of the transcribed material were extracted and condensed, which in turn were coded depending on the topic. These different codes were afterwards categorised. After categorising, the material was clustered into themes to reveal patterns, as well as to distinguish differences within the material.

Data collection

The primary source for information was qualitative interviews with key personnel and field staff. Documents could not be used since the bulk of relevant documents were classified. An interview model was developed to structure the interviews, focusing on the planning and implementation of strategic communication (see Appendix 1). The interviews were semi-structured, giving the needed space for allowing the informants to fully develop their ideas as we sought to investigate the experiences of the people interviewed. They were conducted in the officers' native language (Swedish), and each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.[51] All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Except for the Commanding Officer, the

informants' identities remain confidential. Informants were selected based on a snowballing-technique with the goal of staying within the same tactical chain. By doing so certain variables such as regimental culture and operational climate remained the same for all participants, but perhaps most importantly it was possible to follow the execution through the same tactical chain.

To ensure the validity of the data focus was on identifying themes in the transcripts. Thus, the study is not depending on one single quote in establishing facts, but that a reoccurring theme or topic has the benefit of validating itself by reoccurring with different informants.[52] Here one strength of the study is that all sources are primary sources and share their own experiences. This, of course, comes with its own potential problems, relating particularly to the time elapsed since the tour ended which could cause gaps in the informants' accounts and risk for biases in the respondents' accounts if they consciously or unconsciously provide a misleading picture of how the communication occurred. The fact that confidentiality was used, seeing as no one will be able to trace a statement back to the informant except the author, there would at least not be any need to hide any problematic aspects due to fear of being singled out in the organisation. Another predicament is that all sources are linked to each other in a line of hierarchy. This is evidently a strategic choice, but it also raises the question of their dependency on each other.

Sampling

The informants are chosen because of their position in the hierarchy, seeing as the study strives to get an overall understanding of how messages are sent across the tactical spectrum, ranging from the CO down to section

commanders. A number of informants were accessed by a snowball-sampling technique, where those interviewed help recruit future informants based on their own contacts. However, the sample is still strategic in the sense that all informants were from the tour FS24 in 2012, and their position within the hierarchy is in accordance to figure 1 below.

The picture below illustrates the tactical chain and the number of informants. All in all, 16 informants were interviewed. By choosing to stay within the same tactical chain, some factors can be isolated against, for example, ensuring that the leadership and regimental culture remains constant. Furthermore,

the type of pre-mission training is also the same. Nonetheless, several of the informants have participated in more than one tour to Afghanistan, meaning their impressions might blur with previous tours. This could be argued to give the study a broader perspective on obstacles facing international operations, seeing as the informants can compare and contrast their experiences. On the other hand, it could be argued to decrease our validity seeing as it could be hard to separate one tour from another in retrospect.

The chosen company hierarchy is infantry. The reason for this choice can be traced back to the introduction in which it is argued that
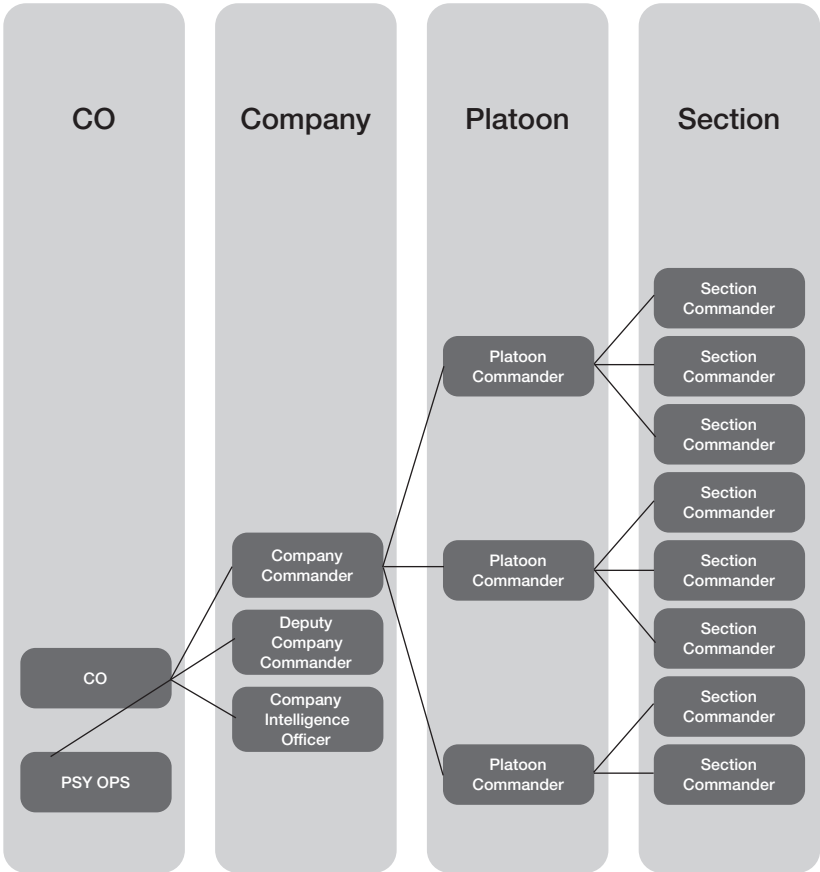

Figure 1. Selection of informants.

the manoeuvre forces should be the ones predominately affecting the sentiments of the locals.

Case study: Sweden in Afghanistan

Compared to other larger nations, the Swedish contribution to ISAF has been relatively small. From 2002 to 2014 around 8 000 Swedish soldiers participated in operations in Afghanistan. This was only about 0.8 percent of the total amount of ISAF-personnel, but from a Swedish perspective, the efforts were strenuous. From 2006 Sweden took charge over the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e Sharif which contained the provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan, Samangan and Sar-e Pul. The area is about five times as large as the size of Kosovo, in which approximately 50 000 soldiers were stationed at its peak. In comparison, when the Swedish force in Afghanistan was at its largest in 2011, it had 570 soldiers stationed. The rotation scrutinised in this article was only slightly smaller.[53]

At the beginning of the engagement, the Swedish state characterised the conflict-level in northern Afghanistan as "calm but with an underlying instability".[54] Over time, the situation worsened in the four provinces. When the Taliban were embattled in the south, they increased their presence in the north. Northern Afghanistan also increased in strategic importance seeing as a major part of ISAF logistics went through this region. In 2012 the "security situation improved" and in 2013 the "situation had changed its character but was still challenging".[55]

The overall information infrastructure in Afghanistan can be argued to be relatively poor. The United Nations estimated in 2014 that approximately 6.4 percent of the population had internet access, although mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants were as high as 74.9 percent (UN Data). The literacy rate among the adult population was in 2011 estimated by the World Bank to be 31.7 percent (World Bank Data), thus making the audience for written material small. The information environment for the Swedish force was thus primarily characterised by an illiterate population in the countryside with small to no means of interacting with other actors than those passing through their village.

Analysis and coding process

The first part of the analysis below connects to the defining aspect of the concept: can the communication be said to be strategic? The second part aims at answering the research question regarding how the tactical level is used as a strategic communicator. The third part concludes with discussing the military communicator's role, and analysing what role the tactical level seems to play: can any specific traits for the military context be discerned?

During the coding process of strategic communication in Afghanistan six categories emerged: 1) National Anchoring (Present, Absent), 2) Target Audience (Outbound, In-house), 3) Planning (Obstacles, Multipliers, Approach, Coordination), 4) Message (Verbal content, Non-verbal, Applicability), 5) Communicator (Holistic mindset, Specific unit, Attitude) and 6) Execution (Obstacles, Multipliers, Sending-type, Method). The first part, asking whether communication can be said to be strategic, consists primarily of quotes belonging to categories 1-3. Quotes from categories 4-6 are part of answering how the tactical level is used as a strategic communicator. If a presented quote deviates from the title of the section, the footnote

will reveal how it was categorised to foster further transparency.

Is it strategic communication?

Drawing primarily upon the CO's interview, this section aims to clarify how communication can be claimed to be strategic. Using Paul's definition, strategic in the sense that we are talking about "*coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives* [Italic in original]".[56]

Political-strategic level

The empirical data reveal that no national directives were issued concerning what communication strategies to pursue during the international mission. The Commanding officer specifically stated that "not anywhere on the political-strategic nor military strategic level was there a clear concept concerning strategic communication for the Swedish effort in the ISAF-mission (MG2016a)". The CO emphasised the need for a "political-strategic overarching structure (MG2016a)" that the military strategy, as well as the rest of the commanding hierarchy, can be attached to. He further described that this is difficult to implement due to non-existing planning structures. However, the fault does not seem to reside in a lack of knowledge, but rather in culture and leadership. "Sweden is not governed the way described in different planning methods (MG2016a)". The military-strategic communication cannot be argued to be anchored in the political will from this viewpoint and is thus not in extension reflected in the messages and themes sent.

On the other hand, if one adds a NATO-label the question at hand "the answer is definitely yes". The CO clarified that "under the prerequisite of a transfer of authority (which is done by all units entering the ISAF environment) the military strategic, operative and tactical levels all adhere to the NATO operation plan, and within the operation plan the components of strategic communication are present" (MG2016a).[57] Thus when fulfilling a Transfer of Authority - the formal process which is used to transfer the right of command, or parts of it, to another actor than the national chain of command (MG2016b) - one could argue that the national strategies are included in the ISAF umbrella through the operation plan. This makes it possible to argue that some form of strategic communication was present during the tour in terms of the condition pursuing national objectives stated in the definition, as these matters were effectively executed through ISAF, though sanctioned by the Swedish government.

Studying the Swedish government's strategy for Afghanistan (2010), it is possible to find directives concerning the Swedish contribution to ISAF. However, these are somewhat generic in shape and do not specify key themes or narratives. For example, it is stated that "Sweden shall strengthen Afghanistan's ability to uphold stability and security, democracy and human rights, and offer its inhabitants the possibility to improve its living conditions and fair and sustainable development". Apart from universal values like human rights, it continues by emphasising the need for: "compassion and solidarity with the Afghan people" and pinpoints "the global responsibility", but nowhere does it mention key narratives or themes. One could argue that this is a missed opportunity for the political level to steer the military, its outlets, and in extension, its communicative effects in changing perceptions.

Target Audiences

The CO identified the local population, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the insurgents as the main target audiences (MG2016b). A Brigade staff member within the PSYOP function mentioned the same groups with the addition of leaders among the insurgents (NN31). This picture is confirmed when studying the rest of the tactical command structure. For example, 13 of 14 tactical commanders (stretching from the company down to section), indicate they interacted with the local population to some degree.

It is clear that most of the target audiences were outbound, but on a couple of occasions, informants mentioned that their own forces were the target audience (in-house). More on this is found in section "messages" below indicating that it intertwines with the content of messages. All in all, it can be argued that the rotation informed or persuaded a *selected audience*.

Coordination

What about coordination of messages then? Within the organisational structure, messages are passed on in orders, often vocally presented by the PSYOP element. This resource was also involved in the planning process when participating in a particular operation (NN23). An officer at the company level also indicates that "we collaborated to a large degree with the CIMIC section" (NN23). Also, the CO points to the press information officer (PIO) being involved in the planning of messages (MG2016a). This point is thus somewhat vague, some informants point to G9 (bridge press-section staff) and the CIMIC function, whereas the CO highlighted the PIO. The majority, on the other hand,

seems to pinpoint the PSYOP element in G3 (brigade executive-section staff).

It is clear that several different functions within the military structure wanted their voices heard. One informant even said that the head of G3 forced G9 to "get in line" (NN31). In sum, it appears that both PSYOP, PA and CIMIC were involved in the process but de-confliction before execution did not always appear to be an opening value considering soldiers' experience (note the example of the conflict between PSYOP and CIMIC below). This further works in line with what is already argued in theory, that we cannot say that the communication executed by manoeuvre forces is a psychological operation, seeing as they are clearly influenced by a number of other actors and functions within the military hierarchy. It seems that an official, overarching and coordinating function of the communication field, besides that of the CO, did not appear to exist. Who really owned the arena of strategic communication in this rotation remains unclear. This seems to further work in line with the experience of other nations, emphasising the need for an overarching coordinating function.

The tactical level as a strategic communicator?

Content of messages

The figure below illustrates all the codes extracted from the subcategory of verbal content. When studying this summary, it becomes clear that there was indeed cohesion between the different levels, that the strategic aspects (extracted from the CO) are visible even on the lowest level. The differences instead appear to regard the degree of the detail based on the different approaches of a theme expressed in a message. The theme
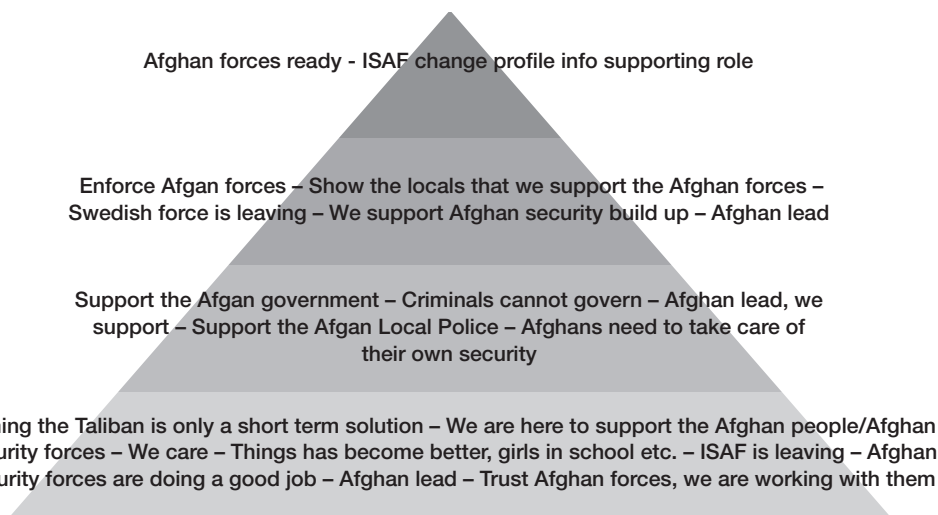
Afghan forces ready - ISAF change profile info supporting role

Enforce Afgan forces – Show the locals that we support the Afghan forces –
Swedish force is leaving – We support Afghan security build up – Afghan lead

Support the Afgan government – Criminals cannot govern – Afghan lead, we
support – Support the Afgan Local Police – Afghans need to take care of
their own security

Joining the Taliban is only a short term solution – We are here to support the Afghan people/Afghan
security forces – We care – Things has become better, girls in school etc. – ISAF is leaving – Afghan
security forces are doing a good job – Afghan lead – Trust Afghan forces, we are working with them

Figure 2. The tactical hierarchy and consistency of messages.

can be viewed as the overarching topic and the message as aspects of that theme.

The pyramid above illustrates how the overarching objective, the changing profile of ISAF, was interpreted on various levels in the tactical hierarchy. Company commanders emphasised the importance of actively enforcing the Afghans, of showing the locals that the Swedish force supports them. Platoon commanders' answers varied from overarching objectives like "support the Afghan government" to pointing out that "Afghans need to take care of their own security". The most interesting difference in interpretation can arguably be found in the section commanders' answers compared to the rest, who tended to involve softer aspects such as "we care" and "things have become better, girls get to go to in school". Also, they appear to have been delivering concrete examples on why the audience should adhere to their arguments such as "trust Afghan forces, we are working with them". Based on this one

could argue that the section commanders in a way function as a facilitator, trying to ease the relationship between the public and the organisation, enabling the message to get through to the locals. This oddly enough works in line with the rather bland and unspecified strategic goals of the Swedish government that emphasised value-oriented objectives.

In relation to this and the applicability of messages, four informants on the lower tactical levels specifically said that the messages tended to be high-sounding in their original shape (NN1; NN3; NN4; NN11), whereas only one stated that they were easy to understand (NN5). This can be correlated to the statement of a company-level officer who said that strategic messages can be disseminated on a tactical level given that they are manageable. "You need to think about what it means to the people on a local level." (NN23) This is particularly important when operating in an environ-

ment like Afghanistan where "focus is on your own village and family (…), there is a limited chance of success when trying to promote central power" (NN23). Probably this is what the section commanders were trying to do, hence their slightly different approach to the central theme.

Furthermore, the Afghan context is not the only challenge; this rotation was different in the sense that most operations were executed in close collaboration with the Afghan forces. The Afghan lead can be argued to represent the central theme of the rotation. Some informants indicated that a part of the message was directed towards the security forces in order to make them understand that they were the ones that needed to plan and execute operations while specifically requesting support from the international force when needed. One informant, for example, stated that "Our message was constantly: you need to do this yourself since we will leave." (NN21) Another informant pointed to the message as representing an in-house communication strategy: "at the start, I guess the message was directed towards us, so that we would understand that we were there to support" (NN12). One could thus argue that the higher officer who stated this initially acted as an in-house journalist.

The section commanders mostly related messages as directed towards the civilian population, one, for example, stated that when talking to the locals "the official message was that the Afghan government wants us to be here and help out with the security and that it is our job to support the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP)" (NN5). Another section commander stated that: "we conducted more or less all operations with the ANA and the ANP and this was to send a signal to the local population that we have a relation to these people. (…) We wanted them to be viewed positively by the locals. That the locals could start trusting them a little bit" (NN6).

It was thus simultaneously a matter of convincing the Afghan security forces to take charge, making the locals trust the security forces, and making sure the Swedish force understood the role it was about to play during the deployment. The same key message can, therefore, be seen as having three different target audiences, where one of them was the Swedish force itself. One could argue that by repeating the verbal message of "Afghans lead operations – we support them when they request it" in-house, it ensured that the actions of the force corresponded with that very idea. An example can be drawn from a company commander who said:

> The Afghans had received a bunch of old RPG grenades at a police station. We had the opportunity to destroy them on location and help them with it, but my decision was to let them take care of it themselves, they have resources within their own organisation. […] That decision was not very easy, seeing as we could have taken care of it, but that would not have helped the Afghans. (NN21)

This indicates that if this company commander had not been receptive to the in-house message, he/she would likely have taken charge of the situation and ordered the disposal of the grenades rather than fostering Afghan forces' long-term problem-solving capabilities. It illustrates how not taking action can send a message and can be argued to work in line with the role of a representative of interest. The commander's active choice not to do anything actively worked in line with a major communicative theme. This theme was in turn repeatedly emphasised by higher commanders among the informants; that it was up to the Afghans to take charge.

They often waited for the Afghans to request support, rather than commence operations themselves. Thus, again not just verbally communicating but passively working in line with the main message. However, the weight of sending a message through action cannot be understated, as one commander characterised his impression from another deployment:

> It was hard to earn the Afghans' trust, but at two times we did it particularly well. The first time was when we got into combat action with our combat vehicle 90 (CV90) and obviated a number of insurgents. The Afghans thought: okay they are not just driving around, they are actually prepared to do something. The second was when a Swedish soldier got his leg blown off. Unlike any other unit, that went back to base, this company commander stayed on location, with the mindset that his task was to help the Afghans, and the Afghans were still there. That one of his soldiers had lost his legs had nothing to do with the task. This attitude, we are prepared to take casualties, it is not just empty words, gained a large degree of trust from the Afghans. (NN22)

As mentioned above, the sending of messages is not only limited to the verbal mode. It is clear that the things we do or do not do can have profound effects in strengthening a particular message.

Communicator

As already established the manoeuvre forces are those in contact with the local population and hence the soldiers that predominately affect the information arena. But who are the communicators within the manoeuvre forces? How do they perceive their role?

All platoon-level and higher ranked commanders were asked who matters most in shaping the perception of an international force and all answered it was the infantry units and ultimately, soldiers. The CO mentioned the manoeuvre forces and CIMIC teams as the backbone with reinforcements of PSYOP capability occasionally (MG2016a). However, who then does actually communicate? In this sample it seemed that one person in each infantry section had been assigned the task of handling the talking points. It was quite common for the section commanders themselves to interact, but it could also be a delegated person within the section. As one platoon commander stated: "it could very well be the section commander, but above all the one most suited. (…) At times it could be the platoon commander" (NN12). A company commander developed this further by stating that: "some section commanders were very good at sending messages whereas others did not even perceive it as their role at all" (NN22). Besides the commanders of sections and platoons, the company commander and the intelligence officer often interacted with the target audiences, personnel from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) (NN23). It seems that higher commanders mostly participated in Key Leader Engagement (KLE), whereas the lower commanders interacted with the local population in general.

Instead of focusing on specific units within the tactical hierarchy, another recurring theme in the transcripts was explicit comments on being a part of a whole, a holistic mindset that the entire tactical chain matters. Nonetheless, when studying the empirical data, different attitudes among the communicators arise. Three different attitudes could be identified among the informants: disbelief, trust and indifference. The majority belong to the category of indifference--typical for this cluster is that the informants emphasise that they are there to solve their military tasks (e.g. NN4, NN5). Another informant

specifically said that communication is not his/her task (NN3).

In contrast, those fitting into the trust cluster accentuated that: "it is not always that you understand why they want something, but you have to trust that a higher commander does" (NN5). The same informant further stated that to some degree you need to believe in the message you send, how else could you communicate it? (NN5) Another commander stated that many of the talking points are those constituting the basic relation that enables the international force to operate in the area at all (NN6).

Conversely, there are the informants who expressed an attitude of disbelief. A platoon commander stated: "our view on the value of the message changed" (NN12). The context around this statement is that the commander expressed disbelief in the truthfulness of the message "Afghans lead". According to the informant, the Afghan police did not seem interested in conducting operations independently, rather the Swedish Commanders virtually had to force them into action, thus undermining the message. One section commander even stated that the messages sent were "a type of propaganda" (NN3). An officer at the company level said that it does not matter what message we send to the local population, it has no effect, what really matters is KLE (NN12). This can be seen to represent a partial distrust, having a lack of faith in the small number of soldiers trying to affect the general public, but having no objection to trying to influence key leaders.

The indifferent and disbelief attitude can interestingly be correlated with having a holistic mindset, many of those commanders seemingly uninterested in the info-arena, later emphasised that the whole tactical chain is essential, and it is hard to isolate one output from another.

Having reviewed the actual communicators and their attitudes towards the sending of messages, the focus will now shift to how the messages are actually passed on.

Execution

Apart from the verbal and non-verbal messages already accounted for, and the communicators themselves, how does the tactical level really execute their communication? In what way, shape or form do we send messages, and why does it sometimes go wrong?

The tactical level usually sends verbal messages through the patrols delivered by either section, platoon or company. During patrols, the individual given the task usually interacts based on the talking points. This approach is often targeted, whereby the commander is informed about whom to talk to; however, informants also expressed situations where interaction simply occurred due to opportunity or in order to solve other tactical tasks. The talking points are the lowest level of structured communication, which can be viewed as enforcing a message. The talking points are shaped as questions and as one informant pointed out: "a message was often sold together with a follow-up question" (NN12. Category: Sending, Execution).

However, at times the talking points seem to have blurred with the general intelligence requirement. One platoon commander specifically said that it was hard to "separate talking points from intelligence needs, perhaps they merge" (NN11. Category: Planning, Coordination). A lot of the RFIs (Requests for Information) given to the manoeuvre forces naturally contained requests about enemy activity and positioning. What needs to be considered is that even these questions send a message. Obviously, they are an inevitable part of military activity, meaning they cannot possibly be circumvented. However, one

could speculate whether they can be coupled more effectively with certain messages, thus painting a less confusing picture. Another informant, for example, stated that:

> I sometimes got the feeling the different sections had not spoken to each other. On the one hand, we got intelligence needs from G2, on the other we got messages from PSYOPS. These were not always synchronised. I do not say they were contradictory, but that in the end there were a lot of questions and a lot of messages. (NN12. Category: Execution, Obstacle)

The statement above indicates that at times the amount of information to be gathered and/or disseminated reached a kind of saturation limit. It appeared that stakeholders in the form of higher officers promoted their own function without having the ability to condense messages and coordinate between themselves and thus ease the pressure on subordinates. Interestingly enough, a company-level officer pinpoints that very fact, that messages need to be carefully prioritised and shaped in direct relation to the given tactical tasks in order to be operational and efficient. "All actions, all talking points, need to correlate. They need to be synchronised, to avoid passing double and diverging messages." (NN22. Category: Planning, Approach). However, with the above quote in mind, it did not appear to have worked problem-free during the tour.

During this rotation, it seems that the majority of the interaction was handled by the company commander, intelligence officers, PSYOP officer, or a liaison officer during company operations. However, the section commanders often shared insights from other tours where they stated that interactions during social patrols often started with a light warm-up conversation in order to establish some sort of relation. The procedure was often a presentation of ISAF and

the purpose of their presence, some brief small talk, after which they slowly began seeking information, combined with sending messages often correlated to the questions posed. A standard intelligence request was frequently based on where the enemy was, and who they were.

One could strongly assume that these types of questions were coupled with messages discrediting the insurgents. One section commander also pointed out that during operations in the areas known as red (hostile), the talking points could be slightly more aggressive, stating that an increase in hostile activity is countered by an increase in the military presence (NN1). Another interesting fact is that not only did the talking points change slightly depending on the village or task, the standard inquiries also varied according to the season. The fighting season being the half-year of summer where the insurgents are more active, compared to what several informants call the "winter framework" (NN23), where many of the fighters from, for example, Pakistan return home, and the armed resistance is less intense.

The actual sending of messages seems to have occurred differently depending on who the communicator was. Some expressed the communicator's role as "a postman" (NN11), others stated that they broadcast messages on a broad front (NN13). All said that they had the freedom to adjust the messages or talking points if necessary. Many of the informants linked this to mission command, the military approach that enables subordinates to solve tasks as they see fit, working along the lines of the commander's intent. Informants also expressed the view that communication occurred as an enabler; that communication (i.e. a good relation) opened doors for those performing basic military tasks such as clearing roads or guarding locations (NN11). This

further frames the tactical level's communicator role as a facilitator.

Factors that seemed to ease communication relate to mutual trust--commanders said that they felt they had the support of the higher commander to adjust behaviour in accordance with the situation on the ground (NN22). The same informant also mentioned the fact that the unit had served together for a long time, which also seemed to increase the confidence in solving tasks (NN22). The CO indicated that a certain Swedish military culture seemed to exist, a disarming and caring mindset of a non- judgmental character that the local population found positive (MG2016a).

One of the most prominent factors which, on the other hand, served as an obstacle to effective communication, was contradictions in messages. There are several examples of this, one being rigid instructions from the higher command. If the higher command tried to centralise campaigns even though out of context in a particular region, it could undermine effective communication. Endeavouring to send the message that "I come in peace" in full combat gear does not send the most cohesive message to the local population (MG2016a). Trying to convey the message that the military forces are present in order to support and protect the local population, is hindered by instructions ordering units to gather the local's DNA and fingerprints; which one could argue implicitly sends a message of distrust. One informant explicitly stated, "it gets a little weird if you state that you are there for their [*the locals*] sake and then start gathering everyone's fingerprints" (NN1).

Informants commented that at times there appeared to be an emphasis on force protection, where there was a political reluctance to sustain Swedish casualties, which in some instances hindered the main message. If one

of the main themes such as "we support the ANSF" is undermined by the priority of avoiding your own casualties, then actions and behaviour contradict the very messages the manoeuvre forces are trying to send. One informant voiced that "if the most important thing was no one dies, then we might as well not have gone there" (NN22).

Lack of synchronisation among functions is, unsurprisingly, another example of contradicting messages. If the PSYOP section wants to emphasise a certain message, then that theme needs to be anchored within other sections, as others might need to adjust their own operational planning. Inability to do so results in information fratricide. One informant stated that he and a CIMIC officer (civil-military relations) were having a fruitful meeting at a school in one of the villages when a "PSYOP guy walked in and razed the entire meeting" (NN23). This can be related to function-centred work, whereby some officers wish to promote their own function rather than the higher purpose or, because of lack of knowledge regarding the operational environment among higher staff members. This further confirms what is already argued: the command and control structure has an important role to play here. Without a clear coordinating role, each officer has the duty to seek information from colleagues and coordinate with them to ensure that possible actions work in line with operational objectives without hindering others. Thus, the practical execution of exerting influence appears to be just as confusing as its theoretical discussion. Practical experience seems to indicate the need for merging IO, CIMIC, PSYOP and strategic communication goals into one operational cell, at least at tactical levels.

Another barrier to effective communication is the faulty usage of procedures. For example, random patrols provide little security,

but consistency in patrol areas, checkpoints and proactive searches do (NN31). Others highlighted the difficulty of not being able to promise anything (NN11). If the lower tactical level is not provided with a mandate to negotiate with the counterpart, and given the resources to do so, there is little leverage in trying to solve the tactical tasks. Furthermore, some informants expressed having problems with an inactive counterpart, the ANSF, which was supposed to lead, but did not, which forced the Swedes to take a more active role rather than that of a supporting one. Ultimately, this clashes with the message of "we are here to support the Afghan forces".

Finally, practical obstacles to effective communication were lack of personnel, language skills, education and resources such as interpreters and vehicles. It is thus clear that within the lowest level several aspects inhibit the full strategic communication potential conducted by manoeuvre forces.

Discussing the military communicator's role

When contrasting the results with the communicator's roles found in other academic fields, it becomes clear that they apply to some degree to the military context. When one considers the most frequently found role 'facilitator' in civil organisations, it could be argued that it is partly compatible with the behaviour of manoeuvre forces. It could be contested that the tactical communicator may be seen as an enabler of tactical activities on location, that he/she helps foster relations in the area which may not be possible without the established connection, easing the bridge between the international force and the target audience.

However, it is important to note that the tactical level often stated that communication

was not their main task, and expressed little interest in the information arena. Also, one informant highlighted the problem of passing on messages yet not having the mandate to provide anything in return to the locals, a feeling of being restrained to some degree. This was in sharp contrast to the very concept of mission command which some informants also emphasised. Many informants reiterated that there were no restraints in adapting the messages or talking points. The informants seemed to have the freedom in phrasing while sending or inquiring for information, but in some cases did not have the mandate to fully negotiate with the locals.

One could thus assert that the tactical communicator also adhered to the role of a 'speaker', a person who makes statements on behalf of a group. This works in alignment with informants' statements like "postman" (NN11) or "broadcasting messages wide" (NN13). Another communicator role, the 'representative of interests' is applicable if the aspect of non-verbal communication is included. Specifically given higher tactical commanders opportunity to work in alignment with mission command, as the case with the company commanders and the RPG-grenades demonstrates. The impact of section commanders' tactical choices can be argued to not have the same impact as that of company commanders given the mere numbers they command and in extension the limits to their commanding rights. The verbal aspects of the 'representative of interests' is probably more applicable to liaison and PSYOP officers. Additionally, these functions probably embody the role of an 'advisor' to top management.

A reoccurring theme was that the informants did not see the sending of messages as a central task. However, gathering intelligence is, and this sends a message too, whether we like it or not. This is compatible with

the role of a 'scout', as the tactical level can definitely be seen to be "monitoring the public opinion and identifying threats and opportunities within stakeholder settings".[58]

Summary: the manoeuvre forces can arguably be primarily taking on an enabling and scouting communicator's role, and occasionally, the role of a spokesman.

Conclusions

The tactical level is used as an enabling force that monitors the operational environment while passing on pre-packaged messages with a degree of interpretation freedom. While it appears that the messages or themes from the Commanding Officer did find their way down the tactical hierarchy and were eventually communicated by the manoeuvre forces, the study uncovers problems in the implementation of strategic communication. Contradicting messages stem from various factors, stretching from lack of coordination amongst sections and rigid instructions from the higher command (perhaps ultimately permeating from lack of knowledge among higher operational levels), down to field-related problems such as lack of interpreters, skill and the proper approach.

Despite problems with the implementation; it is clear that commanders at all levels can be communicators. Nevertheless, most do not think of themselves as having an important role to play in sending messages as they are primarily in the international force to solve traditional military tasks. This said, when the higher tactical levels were asked (platoon and upwards), they all agree that the manoeuvre units are those that have the most significant opportunity to influence the local population. There appears to be a cognitive split here. On the one hand, there is an acceptance that the manoeuvre forces themselves have a significant effect on the shaping of beliefs and attitudes among the local population. At the same time, there is a tendency to distance oneself from this observation. Here a lack of interest and activity is rationalised as the task of communication not being part of the primary tasks of the manoeuvre forces.

To sum up, the findings of this study are important for the future implementation of strategic communication in military systems. Commanders need to ensure that subordinates understand the valuable role manoeuvre forces play in shaping the beliefs and attitudes in the area of operations. Also, higher operational levels need to affirm that the lower-tier units not only have some leeway in the shaping of messages but are also provided with a type of mandate to negotiate. This will further foster the tactical level's opportunity to promote, and to some degree shape, the underlying strategy. Furthermore, segmentation of staff sections risks causing incoherence in messages. Communicators in all military functions need to work together rather than solely within their own skillset, and preferably with someone in charge of the overall coordination; only then can effective output be achieved.

This study sheds light on strategic communication in the context of Sweden in during one rotation in Afghanistan, there is a need to go beyond a single-case study, both in operation area and in time. There is also a need to study other small states' communication activities, as well as to conduct comparative studies if general patterns useful for future tours are to be found. Arguably, this study offers valuable insights also for other small states working in international frameworks, but more research is needed to know this for sure and what lessons are most important for moving towards research-based best practices. There is also a need to look in more depth into the link between the strategic and

tactical levels, and to trace better how the intended message moves through the levels.

The finding's policy-making implementation is clear. Strategic communication is vital for the effectiveness of a security building effort. One key issue is to carefully consider the threat level in the area of operations. Political unwillingness to take any risks, and strict policies of force protection in a relatively calm area, will inhibit the ground force's possibilities to conduct operations which ultimately could have strengthened the overarching objective and thus, the audiences' positive perception of the international presence. In the military context, not taking action can speak far louder than actions and words combined.

If turning to the Swedish context more specifically, some would perhaps argue that this topic is no longer important due to the reemphasising of national defence. However, the effects of globalisation and the interdependence it fosters make it unlikely that Sweden would stop participating in international military crisis management, thus pointing to the continuing relevance of this field. Furthermore, strategic communication would also be valuable in the context of national defence, where communicating efficiently with the Swedish population and possibly also with members of the opposition would at least in part be the work of the tactical level, which is always in close contact with the population by virtue of being on the ground, in the field. This is possibly more important than before, as the border between peace and war has become more and more blurred in the context of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare.[59] With this increased grey zone between war and peace also followed an increased use of, and need for, offensive as well as defensive information operations and strategic communication.

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Appendix

Interview questions			
Section-commanders		**Platoon and higher**	
Questions:	Reveals:	Questions:	Reveals:
Did you have contact with the locals? How?	Who communicates? How?	Commander's intent info-arena?	Long-sightedness, higher purpose
What did you talk about?	Topics? Techniques?	Key messages from the higher command?	Topics?
How did you motivate your presence?	Higher purpose?	Own messages/possibility to adapt?	Autonomy?
Where did you get these motives from?	From whom? 1. Topics 2. Targets 3. Autonomy 4. Long-sightedness 5. Perception own role	How are messages coordinated?	Coordination
Messages from higher command: 1. Key-messages? 2. Who did they concern? 3. Freedom in phrasing? 4. Continuity? 5. Importance?/Relevance?		Who shapes info-arena?	Important communicators?
Sufficient knowledge?	Lack of skill as an obstacle?	How is the section used?	How the lowest tactical unit communicates
Contrasting messages?	Lack of coordination?	Conflicting messages?	Lack of coordination?

List of interviews

NN1, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-28.

NN2, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-19.

NN3, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-19.

NN4, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-22.

NN5, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-20.

NN6, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-22.

NN7, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-05-10.

NN8, Section-level, Phone interview, 2016-05-13.

NN11, Platoon-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-20.

NN12, Platoon-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-29.

NN13, Platoon-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-21.

NN21, Company-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-27.

NN22, Company-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-20.

NN23, Company-level, Phone interview, 2016-04-19.

NN31, Brigade-level, Phone interview, 2016-05-17.

MG2016a, Michael Claesson, Brigadier General and Commanding Officer of FS24. Phone interview, 2016-04-12.

MG2016b, Michael Claesson, Brigadier General and Commanding Officer of FS24. Email, 2016-05-15.

Notes

1. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors alone and does not represent the views of their organisation(s). The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

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