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COMMUNICATION WITHIN NATO – PROCESS AND OPINION SHAPING

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Abstract:

While a lot of material has been produced concerning NATO overall communication process, ranging from Strategic Communication, policies, structures and strategies, communicators and their roles and prerogatives, not much was said or is even known about the Alliance’s internal communication process, procedures and working culture. This is especially important in order to understand the fabric, culture and the modus operandi of the Alliance, which creates conditions for cooperation and finally ensure its’ success. This paper takes a glimpse in the core of the NATO HQ and briefly explains how the business, aimed at negotiating compromise and obtaining consensus, is conducted.

Key words: military advice; silence procedure; Strategic Commanders; tiger team; collaborative working; nation’s red lines; espresso diplomacy; outreach; e-PRIME; cooperative security, NATO partnerships.

1. Introduction - A glimpse on NATO’s inner communication process

This paper aims to offer a description of NATO’s communication process developed internally, through bureaucratic and sometimes ad-hoc mechanisms and processes, not visible for the public, but adopted and refined continuously, so they were able, throughout time, to produce and shape opinions and generate effects. I will use my personal experience, to present a practitioner’s view of how NATO business is conducted concerning the military aspects of the cooperation within the Alliance in terms of NATO’s partnerships and the way in which this task is communicated throughout the Alliance, considering here NATO entities & structures, as well as Allied and NATO’s partner nations. The amount of information on hand, on this subject, exceeds the possibility of this paper, so I will try to synthesize and structure the content in order to find a balance between ‘what should be told versus what should be known’.

Cooperative security through partnerships, as related in the NATO Strategic Concept, adopted at the Lisbon Summit (2010), represents one of the three core tasks of the Alliance (with collective defence and crisis management being the other two referred in the same context). In very broad terms NATO’s partnerships’ network consists of: partner countries, in various cooperation frameworks (i.e. Partnership for Peace, aka PfP/Mediterranean Dialogue/MD, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative/ICI and Partners across the Globe/PatG), international organizations – European Union/EU, United Nations/UN, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/OSCE, African Union/AU, to mention the most relevant ones. Separately or within the above mentioned frameworks there are a total of approximately 40 partner



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countries worldwide which whom NATO has already established and formalized partnership programs. Establishing and nurturing these partnerships has been implying (since the mid 90's) continuous and consistent political and military means and resources from which communication's part has its' own significant share.

While a lot has been said about the Strategic Communication when advertising NATO's communication towards its' external audience, there is little information about how the internal communication process is conducted within the Alliance. For that reason my quest will be directed towards Alliance's internal communication with a focus on how this is conducted in the cooperation/ partnership domain. Needless to say that cooperation is designed to function at the political level (the baseline) with the most of the actions, measures and effects taking place in the military realm, including here defense institutions and especially armed forces.

The partnership domain is conducted within NATO by the Political and Partnerships Committee (PPC), the senior political committee responsible with cooperation policies and associated political guidance, which are further transformed/ translated into military cooperation aspects by two strategic level structures, namely: Cooperative & Regional Security (C&RS) Division/ International Military Staff/IMS in NATO HQ, Brussels, and Military Partnerships Division (MPD)/Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)/ACO in Mons. These three structures, while not being part of the same hierarchy are mainly bind by the cooperation issues, communicate amongst them, directly or indirectly, through periodic reports, memorandums and boards, making the best use of the existing processes and information instruments such as: e-PRIME platform/programme, MTEP application process, Military Cooperation/ Outreach Budget, etc. - provided through the MC endorsed and NAC approved partnership policies.

2 - Formal and accessible – A continuous challenge

Since his creation, in 1949, NATO's structure evolved continuously to include, nowadays, a plethora of groups, boards, subcommittees and committees, created to provide fora for consultations, expertise, military advice and ultimately political decisions, in accordance with the Alliance's role, core tasks, missions and capabilities. NATO's decisions are built on consensus which comes by long and difficult negotiations and finding compromise within all groups, boards and committees from the senior ones up to the Military Committee (MC) and the North-Atlantic Council (NAC), with the latter being the only political body, decision wise, responsible within the Alliance. MC reports directly to NAC and remains the highest military authority providing military advice directly to the Secretary General and the ambassadors within NAC. It is important to observe that while the national positions on a subject/ topic, and their associated mandates are made in the Allied nation's capitals, the consensus is reached in NATO HQ, in Brussels, as a result of intense negotiations and compromising solutions. The lowest common denominator is, in the meantime, the starting point and also could be the final discussion about any consensus building and political-military decision within the Alliance.

Overall, NATO's decision building process is starting in member states' capitals, develops using the inputs provided by the NATO's Command Structure, namely the Bi-Strategic Commanders (SACEUR and SACT) and relevant civilian and/or military groups or committees, which provide expertise on diverse topics, and finally reach the level of MC and NAC, where the subject turns into military advice that eventually informs (and/or nourish) a political decision. All these



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processes are fueled by an intense and continuous communication exercise, conducted both horizontally (between different civilian and military structures, not necessarily linked to each other) and vertically (bottom-up approach, between civilian throughout the chain of hierarchy and/or military entities from command structure) within the Alliance. Random, non-linear or ad-hoc communication channels (diagonal approach) between different civilian and military bodies (not directly linked) could be established or take place, even if are not advisable nor very effective due to the clear chain of command existing in the military realm.

I intentionally used the decision building process instead of decision making, in order to stress the importance of consensus and consultation mechanisms, which relies heavily on the communication process, abilities and skills displayed by the staff members and the leadership, at all levels. Having said that, a short recalling is needed to clarify why this mechanism is so important.

The most common misperception of NATO, in mid-90's, during the conflicts and wars tearing apart Yugoslavia (the play in words 'No Action Talk Only' did not come out of the blue and entered into the military jargon of the Americans and most of the Europeans) derived from the time consuming process of the decision building/making within the Alliance, which prevented NATO forces to timely intervene, prevent and mitigate the effects of the ethnic cleansing and genocide, as well as the humanitarian relief efforts that followed.

Fortunately those times are long gone, and recent operations and missions undertaken by NATO such as: Operation Unified Protector in Libya (in 2011) or the resumed Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan (since 2015) have proved that timely political decisions and quick military actions/ response became one of the Alliance trademarks.

2.1 Formal mechanisms and processes of communication within the Alliance

In this chapter I will briefly refer to the internal formal communication and how this is exercised during NATO day to day business. Later I will refer to the cooperation part and how this is dealt with from a communication view referring here also to the opinion shaping issue. Using the formal mechanisms on hand, consensus in NATO means that all the Allies need to agree on a matter without a single member voting against it. Policies and decisions associated with them are agreed based on a commonly agreed “silence procedure” applicable to all civilian and military committees within NATO. Any “break of silence” (within silence procedure) from Allies needs to be explained or requires a valid argument in order to explain what ‘red line’ means from a national position/point of view. For instance, if a member country like Iceland, (e.g. with no national armed forces) uses his veto rights on a specific matter, for instance, pertaining directly to its interests in High North (namely the Arctic region) no discussion on that matter will even take place.

Consensus, between all Allies, is the only foundation for prospecting further discussions, ideas, consultations, recommendations and actions. Opinion shaping takes place in every stage of conducting these processes.

Mechanisms and processes for building all the above, are found in both Alliance's civilian and military realms, scrutinized and applied by designated NATO entities. All these are formalized through internal communication means (i.e. memorandums, key notes, food for thought, strategic analysis and foresight papers, constructs and concepts, etc.) conveyed through key leader enablers.



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Nothing can be conveyed within NATO HQ's web of groups/committees without a structured communication approach (encompassing themes, objectives and effects) which in turn ensures that complicated and cross cutting matters require debates or informed discussions in their appropriate committees and sometimes in joint pol-mil committees for intertwined topics. This is due to the fact that all NATO committees consists of subject matter's experts (SMEs) on specific domains (not necessarily in communication), but also representatives from national delegations that often are dual or multi-hatted, in terms of tasks, jobs, and expertise. For instance, due to diverse reasons (i.e. ranging from scarce personnel to budget cuts) the majority of the representatives from national delegations are covering various domains in different NATO committees such as: force planning issues, operations and missions, capability building, being also in charge of military cooperation domain (policies and programs wise), all these ensuring, from their side, a more comprehensive approach and extensive knowledge on a wider area of expertise.

Formal communication processes are set via NATO's networks and systems, and include here, strategic thinkers and opinion makers, partners such as: Allied Command Transformation/ACT, Allied Command Operations/ACO, NATO Centers of Excellence/COEs, ACT accredited network of Partnership Training and Education Centers/PTECs, independent or affiliated think tanks, agencies and international organizations, etc.). Besides connectivity, the permanent exchange of information assures mutual benefits from keeping all interested bodies in the loop of communication process, abreast with latest developments and trends, preventing them from the so called 'strategic surprises' or being overwhelmed by sudden demands made by any given NATO command structure.

Internally agreed communication rules, channels and procedures are in place, within MC related bodies and committees, and are applicable in all staffing process, allowing a structured approach which emphasize on: collaborative and cooperative staff working, parallel analysis and exchange of information/ communication in all planning stages, in order to monitor progress and inform decisions for the recommended military advice required up at the MC level.

To make my case I will use the following example:

'According to the 'over the horizon ACT strategy', and in line with their commander's guidance, a Strategic foresight analysis paper, has been conducted by the ACT and endorsed by the Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT, being the leader in the strategic foresight domain). Once the outputs/ outcomes and the conclusions are set in this analysis they will be simultaneously circulated and discussed in different military groups/committees within NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations/ACO and referred to by other interested entities and agencies (i.e. NATO Defense College/NDC, NATO School Oberammergau/ NSO, NATO Standardization Agency/ NSA, NATO Services and Procurement Agency/ NSPA, to name only the prominent ones, etc.). All these structures would provide their inputs and perspective on issues pertaining to their domain, if the case, before this paper will be scrutinized in the relevant committee before reporting to the MC. By doing so, NATO military authorities would ensure that all possible stakeholders will be involved, from the onset, in the information cycle, through appropriate communication means (formal ones, at least at the end of the communication process), allowing an early opinion building in the military arena. Conditions for opinion shaping will be created later within the strategically led discussion, conducted by the IMS through MC related working groups (WGs) responsible for the issues brought up by the ACT paper. Only then, during the decisions made within these working groups, Allies' representatives would eventually decide if



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the issues brought in the paper needs to be presented to their Military Representatives (MILREPS) at the MC level for further refinement and endorsement. The whole staffing and communication process is formalized and conducted according procedural terms, by the chairmen through secretaries of the WGs which belong to the C&RS/IMS.’

All NATO entities are fully responsible for their internal communication processes, as well as the communication with similar structures, in accordance with their chain of command. Nevertheless, vertical and horizontal communication on all relevant aspects and cross cutting issues is encouraged and exercised through formal means, which allow traceability, accountability and maintain organizational responsibility.

To sum up, formal mechanisms and processes for NATO internal communication such as: groups, boards, and committees’ reports, memorandums, strategic analysis, forecasts, notes and minutes, internal reviews, key leaders’ priorities and papers, etc. provide, beyond the institutional channels and existing means of communication, enough instruments able to leverage the cooperative working culture and a collaborative way of doing business that proved to be, so far, a recipe for success. This communication process goes beyond theoretical models and without involvement of communication specialists in a rather adaptive tempo dictated by the leadership’s demands and/or requirements (CMC, Director General IMS/DG IMS, SACT, and SACEUR). The requirements of the ‘five S’ (simple, short, shared, sustained and staffed) will be met in all instances, while communication process would be empowered at all levels.

Communication with national delegations (Allied and partners)

NATO internal communication and the opinion shaping mechanism work hand in hand with the decision building/ making process, with the former feeding the latter in an intricate manner. Several aspects need further clarification in this respect.

Political consultations and decisions can be conducted only in NATO HQ, Brussels, at the level of national delegations. This is paramount in order to understand that nowhere else key political-military issues can be addressed and decided together at the Alliance strategic level, meaning here the NAC. National delegations led by their Ambassadors (members of the NAC) are the focal points for any political negotiations, discussions or consultations initiated by the Alliance in various domains of common interest.

The essential venue, when we speak about Alliance’s military policies, concepts, and strategies, remains the Military Committee/MC led by the Chairman of the Military Committee (CMC) and his executive body known as the International Military Staff/ IMS. Partner nations are also represented in the NATO HQ and are playing an increased role in the Alliance political consultations process, and military cooperation aspects while participating alongside NATO in a variety of operations and missions. For instance, PfP partners (gathering 20 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Balkans as well as from Caucasus region and Central Asia) participate in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).

Using as the reference the NATO partnerships domain I will use the current way of doing business with regard to NATO military cooperation which constitutes one of the most effective tool and communication device in an even more globalized world.

Let’s take as an example the partnership program that NATO has established with Bosnia Herzegovina, a state created after its secession from the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in mid-90’s), as a result of US-led peace negotiations which concluded with the Dayton Peace Agreement.



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Bosnia Herzegovina rapidly joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and started to build practical bilateral cooperation with NATO through the mechanisms provided by the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. The PfP programme is, in essence a formalized partnership implemented at the level, depth and pace chosen by each partner government. This will be done through a two year Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme/IPCP, or an Individual Partnership Action Plan/IPAP, (if both parties agree on a higher level of ambition) consisting of a range of partnership tools and mechanisms (around 1600 activities within a Partnership Cooperation Menu/PCM) that can be renewed periodically, halted or further developed in accordance with the political will and agreement of both parties – NATO and the respective partner nation, in this case Bosnia Herzegovina.

These activities are designed to support cooperation through a mix of policies, programs, action plans and arrangements in various commonly agreed domains, such as: defence reforms, defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, military-to-military cooperation, and exercises, civil emergency planning and disaster response, science and environmental issues, to name the most overarching and relevant ones.

Using the principles of inclusiveness and self-differentiation (available to all PfP community) the Bosnian representatives can select from this menu only the domains and their associated activities that seem the most suitable to their needs and demands/ or meet their requirements. In this process they are assisted by NATO representatives: civilian and military experts in selected domains, officers in charge/ responsible for Balkans region, or ‘country officers’ in charge with NATO military cooperation with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Formal communication means and official channels are used intensively, at experts and staff officers’ level during the selection of domains and associated activities throughout the negotiation process.

Through bilateral staff talks, reciprocal visits and negotiations the agreed draft IPCP is then presented to the MC related Working Group on Cooperation /MCWG(COOP) which will agree the document on behalf of the MC. Once endorsed by the MC the draft IPCP will be approved by the PPC on behalf of the NAC (at Ambassadorial level). Opinion shaping is reflected extensively in the PPC discussions and consultations and mirrors, at a political level, the same issues already debated into the MCWG(COOP) sessions.

The final IPCP will become effective and put in practice by the relevant NATO civilian and military authorities, by allocating funds and resources.

Following NATO’s approval the agreed IPCP will then become subject to the Bosnian authorities endorsement/ approval in accordance with their national laws and regulations, being further put in practice in cooperation with NATO representatives.

Communication with the Bosnian part will take place only within NATO HQ, at the end of the approval process, if no issues would have been raised by any given Ally within the civilian committee (PPC) and/or military representatives within the MCWG(COOP). During the IPCP approval process the NATO civilian and military action officers, involved in its’ production, will be present in all NATO political and military committees able to justify and further clarify on possible contentious or debatable issues requiring more consultations or explanation on Allies’ side. It happened on several occasions when dealing with certain difficult partners and their IPCPs.

Communication process (both institutional and in particular the informal part) between NATO civilian and military committees during this sequential approval is not always swift and without



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frictions, due to the constant prejudice and misperceptions regarding the precedence and subordination of a senior civilian committee (namely PPC) in respect to the unique prerogative of the MC which provides military advice and reports directly only to the NAC (not before/and in front of/ PPC, as in this particular case).

In conclusion, nothing can impede or prevent (internal) communication between different committees within NATO, when clarifying on aspects of common concern and interest, especially when prerogatives of different bodies tend to be blurred by the rapid developments and (un)intentional gaps in the structural architecture of a reforming and transformed Alliance. This could be a side effect of fading relevance affecting some committees, which also provide an opportunity for internal competition in the rush for resources and more prominence in NATO HQ.

3. Formal and informal – Cohabitation relationship

3.1 Informal communication – Between ‘tiger teams’ and ‘expresso diplomacy’

Personal connections developed during common work through the committees and working groups provide enough contacts, working relationships and a degree of trust and competencies, between their respective members. Therefore, is not so uncommon for the members of the working groups to continue discussions, outside the conference halls, in a more relaxed manner, taking into account that NATO HQ provides enough room for off-the-record debates in a discrete and protected environment. Unofficially, this represents not only the informal part of the consensus building process, but offers a substitute, or an alternative in which compromise is obtained, or a solution is reached using a more personal approach.

Committees are made up of individuals, each person/ member being able of displaying a unique set of personalities, perspectives and understanding of the same issue at stake, thus offering a lot from their personal experiences. This is definitely one of the most cherish human value which is added to the group making it more relevant over time.

By saying that, is important to outline also the numerous occasions when Allies’ representatives (i.e. military representatives in the MC related committees) were not able to reach consensus on certain matters, ranging from policies, concepts, up to the approaches adopted in different instances. When disagreement or stalemate occurred (which I personally witnessed during several occasions) the negotiating skills of the chairmen and the secretaries had become the last resort. This usually had triggered some extraordinary measures and procedures consisting of putting together ‘tiger teams’. This concept name and setup was built around the most willing, experienced and strong nations’ representatives (all members in the MCWGCOOP) which would dedicate extra time and meet for discussing the issues at stake in order to quickly find a unanimously acceptable/ compromising solution. Once the ‘tiger team’ will succeed to provide a possible solution it will be further processed within the MCWG(COOP) in order to reach consensus and generate a decision/ formal agreement. Tiger teams were extensively used in time of crisis and hardship and proved successful even when their composition changed over time. The military ethos and values are an intrinsic part of the shared military culture and this facilitated quick and strong camaraderie amongst all members of the MCWGs irrespective of their belonging to a ‘tiger team’.

Each member in the working group voices its’ national stand point being able of bringing up front arguments aimed at validating his statements and remarks during various interventions.



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The chairmen and the secretaries of the working groups/ committees, (assisted by the staff members from respective divisions within the IMS) act as mediators or negotiators, on behalf of NATO's interests and views. Even if they belong to the Allied nations, the IMS members conduct their staffing and secretarial work in an international capacity as NATO military servants. In the same time they report to the IMS leadership (and CMC respectively) which might have a different agenda and timeline than the Allies' representatives in the national delegations. This is not to say that interests within NATO are divergent (between nations and NATO staff) but comes and sometimes looks so due to the differences occurring by default in the real life assignments, priorities and tasks.

One of the most relevant cases, I experienced, during my tour in NATO HQ was the reforming process of the Alliance (which started in 2009) in terms of NATO Command Structure/NCS reorganization. The figures, percentages and slots for NATO posts to be filled in by the Allied nations, in the NCS were considered unrealistic (scarce and very low) by the majority of my IMS colleagues and pairs working in SHAPE and SACT. The real life practice and difficulties were well known to each of us, due to the day-by-day business, while our colleagues from national delegations taught otherwise. The misperceptions and the difference in opinions required extensive clarifications and research wise work from NATO staff members and commands.

When informal means and personality driven contacts and negotiations were exercised through the 'expresso diplomacy' (meaning here a discussion around a cup of coffee inside cafeteria or a high-ranking official/brass' office) the whole restructuring process was halted and revised in order to accommodate valuable inputs from various NATO entities.

The different pace and mindset brought by the 'expresso diplomacy' approach also saved prolonged and endless (dry and inconclusive) discussions on certain agenda topics which produced no results at the MC related working groups level. Then debates moved into NATO cafeteria or even inside designated officials' offices (around a series of cups of coffee) where finally a compromise would be preferable to an additional set of meetings. A combination of informal setup, a degree of familiarity (and not the least) a kind of warm and hospitable atmosphere created an open minded environment, facilitating viable and creative solutions from people willing to solve issues and make decisions.

3.2. Informal communication – ‘Food for thought’ papers

An interesting manner of the NATO military leadership (namely CMC, IMS, SACT, SHAPE) to exercise some informal means of communication and generate opinion shaping referred to the production and circulation of 'food for thought' papers on mind challenging topics and Alliance's burning issues, such as: reorganization and reform of NATO agencies, Allies' oversight and control over the NCS and NATO Force Structure (NFS), reduction of joint and component commands and services associated with these, emerging security challenges, armaments control and reduction, countering piracy and fighting insurgency in the future operational environment, defence planning capabilities, etc. Even if the majority of these topics require, at first glance, extensive knowledge and wider area of expertise, in fact many of them are intertwined and cross cutting matters that demand a closer look from a comprehensive approach perspective. All these required strategic vision and perspective that fueled discussions and further staffing at teams, sections and branches level. Also timing of producing and refining these materials was important due to the progress reports made by the leadership and presented



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to nations within specific senior committees and boards. Inputs on this subjects were welcomed and helpful due to their potential of validating or denying some of the content, concepts, products and ideas formulated in the outputs/reviews or documents.

To make a case in point I will exemplify.

Before the restructuring and transformation process of the Military Cooperation Division (MCD) into Military Partnerships Division (MPD)/ SHAPE/ ACO in Mons, a long informal debate took place within partnership community in the NATO military domain (especially between IMS, SHAPE and SACT) pertaining to: additional functions versus structures, coordination relationships, outreach budget ownership, priorities areas for military cooperation and resources alignment, reporting chain, etc. Both lead military structures in the military partnerships domain (C&RS/IMS and MCD/SHAPE) fought for their relevance and role played including through ‘food for thought’ papers presenting their perspective on how military cooperation should be dealt with in accordance with the prerogatives and instruments on hand, in order to avoid duplication of efforts, maximize the effects on partners, avoid ineffective and redundant staff work, proper human resources management, use cost efficiency tools and prioritize resources in accordance with Allied policies and recommendations. It has been rightfully perceived as an intellectual exercise aimed at empowering all staffs in the overall NATO transformation and restructuring process, by also providing honest and informed feedback to the commands.

It is an approach worth adopting by our echelons and commands in order to involve staffs and individuals in the overall process of improving our military culture, performance and effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

A great deal of NATO communication process and opinion shaping, at least in the Partnership - military cooperation domain, relies on a unique combination between formal and informal processes which are complementary while feeding each other. Cooperation cannot be done in isolation, by itself. It requires at least two parties to play this complicated game: a focused and motivated sender and a careful and interested recipient. For this relationship’s success both need to rely on a strong, structured and continuous communication mechanism and associated processes.

While opinion building comes together with the national standpoints the opinion shaping part is gaining more substance (‘put flesh on the bone’) and granularity once the consensus building is growing up during the consultations process.

A cohabitation relationship between formal and informal means of communication represents one way to achieve success and maintain strategic and operational tempo in an evolving security environment, characterized by an expanding network of Allies and partners, more complex challenges and obstacles offered by a more globalized world.

Having in mind the finite resources on hand and the growing hunger for quick and enduring success, communication turns into a genuine weapons system that NATO will deploy and engage hopefully in a sustainable manner to adjust and improve his internal processes and allow its’ further development.



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