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## Cultural Awareness in Peace Operations: Effective Marketing or Strategic Communications

Fotini Bellou\*

*Dept of International and European Studies, University of Macedonia, 156 Egnatia str, 54006, Thessaloniki, Greece*

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### Abstract

Cultural awareness is receiving a growing attention in disciplines studying the effects of communication. It is understood as the ability to attain knowledge about the particular cultural characteristics of the people of a certain terrain (state or region). They often reflect a cluster of certain beliefs and practices, which may substantially differ from one region to another. Cultural awareness has also gained prominence in recent academic discussion as regards international conflict resolution and crisis management. The importance of cultural awareness as a crucial element in the conduct and planning of contemporary peacekeeping and stability operations is gaining wide acknowledgement. As in Touristic Marketing in which cultural awareness is often employed as the vehicle to increase the affiliation of *xenos*, (the foreign visitor) with the aspired touristic product, similar approaches have developed in the study of conflict resolution. In the context of peace operations or stability operations, “the peacemaker” is also a *xenos* (a foreigner and a stranger) to the region they are deployed. Importantly, the evolution of international peace operations in recent years has rendered communicating the credentials of the peace dividend to the local population, as the key factor in the effective evolution of the peace mission. Accordingly, cultural awareness is considered as the element of strategic importance since it is the vehicle through which effective communication is substantiated. It generates lines of communication between the providers and the receivers of the ‘peace product’ thus progressively creating the environment for the local population to become true affiliates of the credentials that the peace mission is providing.

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### 1. Introduction

Communication strategies have gained great prominence in recent years. In the contemporary complex and interrelated world, messaging, the transfer of evaluated or non-evaluated information to different audiences has

\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail address:* [fbellou@uom.gr](mailto:fbellou@uom.gr)

evolved into one of its key characteristics. In such a context, as advocated by Hallahan et al (2007:4), ‘organizations vie for the attention, admiration, affinity, alignment, and allegiance of constituents of all sorts—customers, employees, investors and donors, government officials, special interests group leaders, and the public at large’. The notion of strategic communication therefore has come into fore, defined as ‘the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission’ (Hallahan et al, 2007:3). The term is currently used extensively by different disciplines focusing either on the context, effects and character of this messaging. This paper discusses the way in which strategic communication applies to contemporary conflict resolution and peace operations by giving emphasis on the importance of cultural awareness in facilitating its process. It will begin with a discussion of the evolution of contemporary crisis management in order to show that the military or civilian personnel comprising a peacemaking or stability mission are nowadays called to operate in regions in which they are considered foreigners while they are mandated to immerse into internal political and institutional building, a task by itself requiring coordination with the local population. This implies that international forces are not considered a friendly presence by all segments of society and political groups thus indicating strong prospects for military reaction against them. (European Defence Agency: 2009). Against this light, communication practices have been employed aiming at facilitating an environment in which the peacemaker ceases from being considered xenos, a foreigner and a strange, by the local populace. This paper contents that in contrast to previous practices, in contemporary peace missions, especially when operating in utterly unfriendly environments, international personnel have launched certain communication practices in order to cease from being regarded strange and strangers by the local population. Strategic military thinking has also changed accordingly. By this way, basic strings of communication are established as to consequently facilitate the promotion of their peace messaging. This analysis begins with a discussion of the evolution of contemporary peace operations in order to show that current international peace operations have taken such forms that the incorporation of strategic communication into their planning is considered inevitable. It will be followed by an analysis of the way in which strategic communication has been incorporated into peace operations. The essay concludes with a brief discussion on the importance of cultural awareness in peace operations by analyzing the fashion with which it has been incorporated into strategic communications between the providers and the receivers of the peace product.

## **2. The evolution of peace operations**

Peacekeeping operations have experienced a strong evolution since the end of the Cold War. Different regional military conflicts have informed and accordingly transformed the practices and methods with which international organizations and big powers have struggled to resolve them (Campbell, 2008). The evolution in the tasks required to be performed in the context of current peace and stability operations have brought into fore assignments that demand particular forms of interaction between the international personnel deployed in a region and the local population thus necessitating the formation and application of certain patterns of communication. This evolution is usually described in the theory of conflict resolution through a ‘generations’ taxonomy which aims to clarify the process through which a very demanding peacebuilding agenda has been constructed to be performed by international actors while also addressing the way in which this evolution is analysed and theoretically evaluated (Richmond, 2010). For the purpose of this analysis emphasis will be placed more on the way in which international practice in resolving conflicts and in peacemaking has evolved while some theoretical issues will be toughed to the degree that clarify the way in which communication practices have been upgraded into a key component of this very international practice. This international practice as explained below ‘evolved rapidly from multidimensional peacekeeping to statebuilding, at first with the consent of local actors and in a multilateral form, and now, on occasion, without consent. As a result the demands on the role of the UN and its supporting actors multiplied and diversified enormously during this period’ (Richmond, 2010:22). In practice, the first generation, known as traditional peacekeeping, were peacekeeping missions formulated and controlled by the United Nations and had particular characteristics based on certain fundamental principles. Namely, the consent of

the parties involved in the dispute was necessary; the use of force by the peacekeepers was out of question except in self-defence; and demonstrating military neutrality towards the rival armies and political impartiality towards the rival countries was paramount since legitimacy had to be upheld at all times (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2004:124). In traditional peacekeeping, the tasks to be performed involved the monitoring and supervision of an existing cease-fire. Those operations had neither military objectives nor additional military tasks. For this reason, no serious questions were raised by local populations. From a theoretical perspective, this circumspect state-centric approach has remained representing, as Richmond advocates (2010:17), political realism in which conflict resolution is understood and at the same time limited to the interests of the interveners who will ultimately define the character and extent of their involvement. This realist approach has not ceased to exist. Yet it has been informed, as this analysis advocates below, by certain assumptions 'borrowed' from consequent theoretical approaches, which will inevitably continue to serve the interests of the third parties in establishing a certain order resulting from managing a crisis in a region.

The second theoretical perspective developed around an individual-oriented perspective will provide the basis upon which a critical perspective will formulate, as noted below, as a fourth generation of scholarly discussion on peace operations. (Bellamy, 2004:18). In the meantime, however, peace operations evolved in practice and informed accordingly the theoretical assumptions of its third wave. This third generation scholarly analysis seems to have combined previous approaches and in fact has indicated elements of applied self-reflective stances, which imply according to the author its openness to adaptation and therefore prevalence. Not surprisingly, it considers peace operations to be inevitably multilevel and multidimensional favouring a top down rather than a bottom up setting of preferred order, yet it seems not to reject occasional renegotiation between the providers and receivers of the peace product constituting this liberal order. In any case, the evolution of the international practice around peace operations involving also counter-insurgency practices indicates that communication strategies have been inevitably incorporated into peace operations practices while cultural awareness has been upgraded to a crucial component in this process. Nowadays multidimensional operations are mandated to address complex emergencies (United Nations, 2008:21). These may concurrently involve problems such as: 'collapsed state structures, humanitarian tragedies caused by starvation, disease, or genocide; large-scale fighting and slaughter between rival ethnic or bandit groups, horrific human rights atrocities; and the intermingling of criminal elements and child soldiers with irregular forces' (Thakur & Schnabel, 2001:12; Malan, 1998:14-5).

Therefore, personnel participating in multi-dimensional peace have to launch activities aiming at a military disengagement, demobilization and cantonment of former militants; to perform police duties; to monitor human rights and enforce their promotion; to disseminate information; to observe, organize and conduct elections; facilitate rehabilitation policies for former militants but also of victims of war; facilitate repatriation of refugees, provide administration services while working with or overseeing the operations of regional or non-UN peacekeeping operations (Thakur & Schnabel, 2001:11). Certainly, these tasks taken together in fact constitute the establishment of a 'peace order' in a region, which has to be driven towards sustainable peace. Perhaps the most important and demanding assignment that the Security Council could authorize international personnel to perform is to undertake governing responsibilities and basically behave as a quasi government in a certain region (i.e. East Timor, Kosovo). 'Current peace operations thus intrude into aspects of domestic sovereignty once thought to be beyond the purview of UN activity' as Doyle and Sambanis (2006:11). Yet, not all UN operations have been successful when evaluated by means of the peace dividend provided to local populations Doyle and Sambanis, 2006). These peacekeeping tasks were performed arguably in the absence of outstanding challenges from organized local spoilers to the lives and/or the very existence of the international military and civilian presence (Stedman, 1997:5-53). However, in the aftermath of 11th September 2001 the situation became far more complicated (Tardy, 2004). Undoubtedly, these new missions known as stability operations are far more demanding than previous multidimensional peace missions. They are understood as 'military and civilian activities conducted across the spectrum from peace to conflict to establish and maintain order in states and regions' while acknowledging that '[t]he immediate goal often is to provide the local populace with security,

restore essential services, and meet humanitarian needs. The long term goal is to help develop indigenous capacity for securing essential services, a viable market economy, rule of law, democratic institutions, and a robust civil society' (England, 2005 cited in Wagner, 2008: 485). In other words, current forms of international involvement in peace operations or stability operations have revealed the multifaceted importance of communicating the peace and stability message to local population (Katagiri, 2011:170-195). Yet, to generate and maintain public support by winning the hearts and minds of the public is crucial yet not without tactical shortcomings that need to be addressed (Katagiri: 2001: 170-195). In such a context, it is hardly surprising that strategic communication has evolved into one of the most popular concepts in current discussion of contemporary military strategy and more specifically on crisis management.

### **3. Strategic communication: a key enabler in crisis management**

The concept of strategic communication has been used extensively in recent years by different disciplines. Although there is no agreement of a single concept, strategic communication can be safely understood as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission' as advocated by Hallahan and et al (2007: 3) and it is used in different academic areas such as management, marketing, public relations, technical communications, and political communication. It regards the way in which an organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional actions of its leaders, employers, and communication practitioners.' An integral part to this process is also the use of relationships building or networks. Amongst the different organizations that use strategic communication are governments and nowadays-international organizations, which employ practices of public diplomacy and public affairs to affect perceptions of their constituencies and certain audiences. This very organizational objective has been endorsed also by the United Nations, which insists on the importance of incorporating strategic communications into its function in order to make its purposes more visible to its global audience (United Nations, 1997, cited in Hallahan et al 2001:8). Strategic communication has been conceptually reinvigorated in the United States from its erstwhile military connotations to be incorporated into the government's general discussion on public diplomacy (Gregory, 2005). According to the White House National Framework for Strategic Communications 2010:2), STRAT-COM is defined as: 'a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.' It is obvious that the document adopts a far more general organizational perspective rather than the narrow stance hitherto found in military strategy documents. A similar general organizational perspective is also discussed in the United Kingdom and a contribution to this discussion is a Chatham House Report by Cornish, Lindley-French and Yorke (2011:5) who provide the rationale for incorporating strategic communications in all governmental activities.

A useful conceptualization of strategic communications focusing on its political-military dimension is offered by Christopher Paul, (2011:3) who defines it as the 'coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intent to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives.' In contemporary international politics, strategic communications has revealed its complicated character in an environment of real time transfer of information globally and the has been used extensively (Hallahan et al, (2001:3-35). As noted by Sir Lawrence Freedman (2006:73-93), strategic communications is evolving as a process into managing information paths that could not be contemplated before and thus calls for a strong adaptation to the new multifaceted realities. Nowadays, governments employ strategic communication tactics in order to present or cultivate narratives that promote their national interests. From a different angle therefore this narrative promotion has been examined by other disciplines such as Marketing for instance which examine inter alia organizational communications. For example, the way in which cultural issues and national narratives are promoted by governments has been discussed also in the context of Touristic Marketing, which focus on practices of promoting cultural tourism or cultural diplomacy as aspects of a state's national branding

(Kavoura, 2007; Kavoura and Bitsani, 2013). In the realm of national defence, however, all known governmental definitions of strategic communication indicate certain similarities. For the US Department of Defence strategic communications are defined as ‘all those focused United States government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power’ (Department of Defense, 2001: 443 cited in Techau, 2011:3). The same logic is also adopted in British thinking in which strategic communication is defined as ‘a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identities effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits that promote and sustain particular types of behaviour’ (Tatham, 2008:2 cited in Techau, 2011:2). Yet, the notion has received its appropriate attention only by a limited number of governments.

### *3.1. Incorporating strategic communication into peace operations*

In the realm of peace operations the UN, NATO and the European Union have incorporated strategic communication in their planning. Indeed, NATO is the organization that implements the stability operation in Afghanistan since 2003, (International Security Assistance Force- ISAF). Not surprisingly, NATO has incorporated strategic communication in peace missions by adopted two documents, NATO Strat-Com Policy, PO (2009) and NATO Military Concept for Strategic Communications, (2010) respectively. Accordingly, NATO personnel is expected through their actions and general behavior, to persuade the local people in the regions on which they operate that foreign personnel has to be regarded as the trusted providers of the peace and stability product. It is also suggested that strategic communication is so important that the military personnel in fact is asked not only to change its attitude towards communication but also to make it a central element of its everyday thinking and working, ie, to accept that communication is as valuable as the military battle itself (Techau, 2011:1). Research conducted by the College of Europe as regards applied strategic communication practices indicated that NATO in Afghanistan was more committed to the logic of messaging than EU-led personnel in Kosovo (Peters, 2010). In fact, what strategic communications offers to peace operations is their smooth implementation so long as it helps persuade local and international audiences of their merit. As for the tasks involved, as Cornish, Lindley-French and Yorke, (2011:32) rightly state they ‘include inter alia, influencing foreign populations, providing public information, acting as the commander’s voice; countering enemy propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and opposing information.’ Central to strategic communication is ‘a good understanding of the audiences and how to engage them’ in its process (Cornish, Lindley-French and Yorke, 2011:33). As Techau (2011:3) confirms, it is not enough to identify and name distinct target audience but the characteristics of this audience have to be researched. This involves inter alia ‘the cultural framework of the communications environment (including customs, beliefs and taboos prevalent in that environment); preferences, desires, needs and interests of target audiences’ (Techau, 2011:5-6). In this light, the peacekeeper, or the counter-insurgent at times may also evolve into becoming the messenger. For if strategic communication is the method and/or the process through which attitudinal change of an audience is sought, then cultural awareness of the characteristics of this audience is one of its strategic ingredients. This is because, it has been confirmed by international practice that a piece of cultural information can easily have a multiplying effect in the implementation of a mission, positive when present and negative when absent.

## **4. Cultural awareness: a key component in strategic communication**

Cultural concerns had not been the point of interest in the practice of peace operations as these evolve in more than two decades of international experience. Equally, research on those issues was sporadic. Only few authors

(Rubinstein: 1989, 2003, 2005 and 2008) have been consistent in their assertions that sensitization on cultural aspects of the local population in regions which host international peacekeeping personnel is important for the effective evolution of the operations. Cultural awareness is understood as the ability to comprehend the cultural characteristics of a certain population and also be in the position to distinguish the way in which these are differentiated from others. The work of Pouligny, (2006) is perhaps the only substantiated work focusing her analysis on a bottom up perspective as regards peace operations and presents with anecdotal eloquence the detrimental effects of cultural indifference or cultural disrespect by peacekeepers towards the local population in cases such as Somalia, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Afghanistan. For the purpose of this analysis, discussion will focus on the cultural alienation that has been observed between the third parties, the internationals, deployed in a peace mission and the local population. Importantly, when a peacemaking mission is conducted concurrently with a counter-insurgent campaign, then cultural awareness becomes the only vehicle that facilitates forging bridges of communication with the public.

Cultural awareness is the necessary ingredient for improving the knowledge of the human terrain in a conflict or a post-conflict region. Currently, the human terrain system, understood as the ethnographic, economic and cultural characteristics of the populace leaving in this terrain, is being considered an integral part of US military thinking (Kipp, Grau, Prinslow and Smith, 2006:8-15). Despite the fact that it cannot alone win counterinsurgency wars, its absence contributes substantially to their loss (Duyvesteyn, 2011: 452). In Iraq, for example, as Wagner (2008:496) rightly advocates coalition forces 'had to interact and coordinate with local government officials, interface with the populace, and employ translators in an environment where these cultural and linguistic barriers contribute to a lack of understanding and trust.' This is particularly true 'when missions are multinational in composition and introduce foreigners to the host society (Emphasis added, Tomforde,2010:450). Yet, the salience of cultural awareness rests on the condition that [w]ithout knowing local cultural patterns of behaviour and interpretation, peacekeepers too easily react in inappropriate ways, even when they mean well' (Tomforde, 2010b:535). From a strategic point of view, cultural awareness, sheds light and frequently elaborates a situation that has been resulted not from a rational choice or western style thinking of cost-benefit calculation (Duyvesteyn, 2011:451). In fact, the individual operating in a peace mission, either as a commander or as a soldier, is more likely to be considered a *xenos* by the local population, namely, a foreign person or a stranger (Allen, 1991:1418). In fact, *xenos* (ξένος) is all other peoples in contrast to the ones with whom we feel affiliated (relatives or friends). *Xenos* is the individual who comes from a country different to ours, who comes from another region. A synonym to *xenos* is *alloethnis* (αλλοεθνής), that is the individual who comes for a different (-allos) ethnicity (*ethnos*) to our own (Babinotis, 2002:1216). Moreover, the word *xenos*, is also used to describe the person, foreign to the house, who has been invited or/and is hosted in the house of another person (Babinotis, 2002:1217). The respect and worship to which the ancient Greek tradition assigned to *xenos*, obliging the host to make *xenos* feel as a friend and an affiliate until (s)he goes back home, has been frequently framed by Touristic Marketing. Admitting the importance of establishing cultural affiliations amongst peoples of differentiated cultures, some analyses in Tourism Marketing have advocated for the importance of communication policies aiming at promoting cultural products which generate familiarity and a sense of 'common sharing' amongst peoples who are otherwise strangers. For instance by advertising sites of world cultural heritage, which by itself entail an attracting and unifying power (Kavoura, 2013) the touristic product is rendered far more familiar.

Equally, the peacemaker, is a *xenos*, since up until recently (s)he did not appear interested in rendering the host population shareholders of the peace product the internationals were providing for. However, it is widely acknowledged nowadays that innovative thinking producing unifying attitudes is welcome in counter-insurgency. Indeed, reports have shown that when there is a effort by internationals to behave in a culturally aware fashion, the responsiveness and attitude of the local population has been far more positive (Duffey, 2000:157). Although different tactics and especially innovation might be proved an effective tool, it nevertheless demonstrates the inherent difficulties in merging military mentalities and cultural non-kinetic perspectives. Recent research has shown that mapping cultural and ethnographic characteristics in support of the formulation of a later targeted

communication policy has taken place quite frequently and at different subject areas (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2013:184). However, promoting cultural awareness in peace operations has been an under-researched area which invites further multidisciplinary interest.

Western militaries are called to adjust to such controversial tasks which although have been recognized as important, they are proved extremely difficult to be implemented in practice (Griffin, 2011). As Haddad advocates, the French military has already incorporated the notion into the French National Security Strategy, yet this is a difficult task to be implemented fully in practice. (Haddad, 2010: 569). However, there are issues that may be obvious, if driven through the lens of cultural awareness as the useful textbook of Ltc. Wunderle (2006) illustrates. In particular, training on those issues is important and indeed is currently ongoing by governments and respective organizations. As Wunderle (2006:3-4) shows cultural awareness has been integrated in ‘battle preparations as well as training and doctrine.’ Importantly, the US Department of Defence created in 2006 the Human Terrain System which is a programme that develops, trains and integrates a social sciences capability and analysis into operationally relevant decision making (The Human Terrain System). Thus, it seems to be gradually acknowledged that for peacebuilding to succeed, peace has to be built not according to the image of the peacemaker but with respect to the ethics of the people on the ground (Van Der Lijn, 2013 and McFate 2005). However, it is important to highlight the difficulties in practical implementation of such culturally aware policies at all levels (Tomforde (2010b: 526). Yet, this is a request to which strategic planners may not entirely agree. Nevertheless, the first seeds have been cultivated in a area of research that needs further elaboration as regards its different facets and importantly its certain communication strategies. It has to be highlighted however, that further research in addressing the problems is needed.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper contends that cultural awareness has evolved into a strategic component in contemporary peace missions. Precisely because of their compound character, these missions currently require communication strategies and practices that were not considered important up until recently. In contrast to operations of the 1990s, stability operations in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed the need for a far more complex and demanding performance by internationals, including counter-insurgency practices. Against this background, strategic communication started to gain prominence in strategic thinking and practice while the notion of cultural awareness evolves into one of its integral elements. The benefits of knowledge of the local population’s cultural characteristics, beliefs and customs is proved essential not only for establishing trusted communication channels between the providers of stability and the beneficiary population but importantly for persuading the latter of the importance of this stability product. This paper has also showed that the peacekeeper has to cease from being considered xenos, a foreigner and a strange, by the local populace since their duties require the latter’s strong collaboration. Yet, recent practice has indicated that cultural awareness, as a component of strategic communications, is receiving a constructive attention, despite some potential shortcomings that its incorporation in everyday practice may entail. This is a true progress, which again was generated from a devastating learning process, which unveiled the importance of applied communication policies.

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