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United States Government Accountability Office
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May 24, 2012

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman
The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

Subject: *DOD Strategic Communication: Integrating Foreign Audience Perceptions into Policy Making, Plans, and Operations*

The Department of Defense (DOD) recognizes that everything it does communicates a message, from having soldiers distribute soccer balls in conflict zones to scheduling joint exercises off the coasts of foreign nations. However, DOD officials stated that the department has struggled for several years to strategically align its actions with the messages it intends to communicate to foreign audiences—an effort that is also referred to as strategic communication.¹ With the growth of global communications, these messages are quickly transmitted around the world and can affect not only military operations, but also perceptions of the United States by foreign audiences. Other agencies, such as the Department of State (State), also directly engage foreign audiences and therefore DOD recognizes it can benefit from acting in concert with interagency partners.

You requested that we review DOD's various efforts to engage foreign audiences. Our objectives for this report are to describe (1) DOD's approach to strategic communication, (2) the initial actions that DOD has taken to implement this approach, and (3) DOD's plans to reflect the roles of its interagency partners in strategic communication.

Scope and Methodology

To address our objectives, we reviewed DOD documents defining and describing strategic communication, such as the *DOD Report on Strategic Communication* and the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. We interviewed DOD officials involved in developing the initial actions that DOD has taken to implement its approach to strategic communication and in conducting information operations, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, and Special Operations and Central Command combatant commands. We also interviewed officials from State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and

¹DOD formally defines strategic communication as “focused U.S. government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with and leveraging the actions of all instruments of national power.” See: Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 11, 2011).

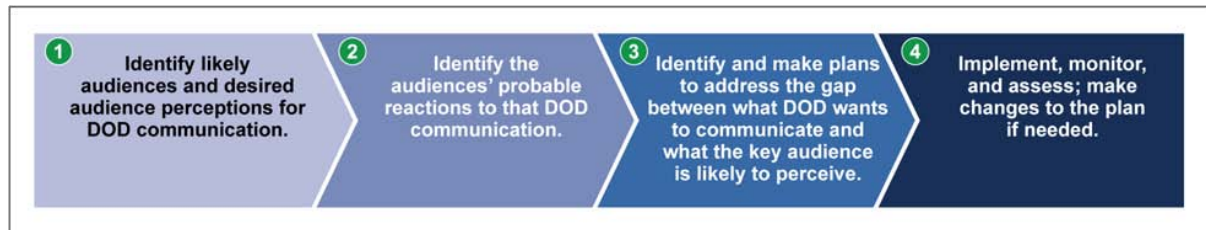
the Broadcasting Board of Governors to understand their role in DOD's approach to strategic communication.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2011 to May 2012 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Summary

DOD officials are seeking to approach strategic communication as a process that leaders, planners, and operators should follow to integrate foreign audience perceptions into policy making, planning, and operations at every level. However, descriptions of strategic communication in several key documents—including the *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the *National Framework for Strategic Communication*—characterize it differently. For example, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* describes strategic communication as the coordination of activities such as information operations² and public affairs, among other things. According to DOD officials, these varying descriptions of strategic communication have created confusion within the department. To address this confusion, DOD is drafting an instruction to clarify the steps of the strategic communication process, which DOD officials expect to be completed in late spring or early summer 2012 (see fig. 1 here; fig. 1 also appears in encl. I).

Figure 1: DOD's Strategic Communication Process



Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents.

DOD has taken some initial actions toward integrating the strategic communication process into its policy making, plans, and operations at every level, such as ensuring that top leadership is driving the effort. DOD officials acknowledge that DOD staff across the department do not currently integrate the process into their efforts in a consistent manner. To address this condition, DOD is taking some preliminary actions to transform the

²Information operations are the integrated employment of electronic warfare, computer network operations, military information support operations, military deception, and operations security, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting U.S. interests.

department's culture. Our prior work has identified some key practices for implementing successful transformations, some of which DOD is demonstrating, as follows.³

- *Ensure top leadership is driving the effort.* The Secretary of Defense directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs to clarify the strategic communication process so that policy making and communications planning are better integrated.⁴ Based on this direction, a senior advisor within the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy is tasked with guiding the draft DOD instruction through the department's internal review and initiating the culture change needed to ensure that leaders, planners, and operators understand how actions and messages are aligned and how they may be perceived.
- *Establish a purpose for the transformation.* According to senior officials, DOD needs to transform how its personnel view strategic communication because communicating the right message to the right audience is crucial to the success of DOD's policies, plans, and operations. To ensure that this transformation occurs, senior officials said DOD personnel must understand that audience perceptions and reactions are integral to the department's policy making and planning activities. According to DOD officials, to help achieve this change in thinking, the draft DOD instruction clarifies that strategic communication should be used by all leaders, planners, and operators and establishes that strategic communication is different from capabilities such as information operations. If the instruction is approved by the Secretary of Defense, it would be the formal guidance document for all entities within DOD to follow for strategic communication policy.

Officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff have also identified some subsequent actions to implement once the DOD instruction is completed. Specifically, the officials said they will need to update DOD documents, perform outreach, and augment existing training. For example, the *Guidance for the Employment of the Force* and the combatant commands' theater campaign plans will need to be updated to reflect the completed instruction. In addition, the officials recognize the need to engage various entities within DOD that are responsible for training personnel to ensure that these entities appropriately incorporate strategic communication into their curriculum.

DOD officials stated that the department plans to initially focus inward on clarifying its approach to strategic communication and then update guidance documents to reflect the roles of its interagency partners. The draft instruction that DOD is developing does not include references to interagency partners because, according to DOD officials, the

³GAO, *Highlights of a GAO Forum: Mergers and Transformation: Lessons Learned for a Department of Homeland Security and Other Federal Agencies*, [GAO-03-293SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 14, 2002). Other key practices that GAO identified include setting implementation goals and a timeline to build momentum and show progress, and using performance management to assure accountability for change.

⁴The Secretary of Defense initially directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs to develop a DOD directive. However, upon reviewing the draft directive, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that the language of the directive would reinforce the existing misunderstanding of strategic communication. According to DOD officials, the Chairman, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs then agreed to explain strategic communication through an instruction, which could be longer and provide more detailed guidance than a directive.

issuance of the instruction would result in updating other guidance documents, such as a potential manual on strategic communication or the combatant commands' theater campaign plans. These updated documents would, in turn, explain the roles of DOD's interagency partners. DOD officials noted that the department currently uses audience analysis conducted by State and the intelligence community, and they added that this type of interagency coordination could be applied throughout DOD to support the strategic communication process—for example, by identifying likely audiences for DOD's communication.

For additional information on the results of our review, see enclosure I.

Agency Comments

We provided DOD, State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors the opportunity to comment on a draft of this report. State provided technical comments that we incorporated, as appropriate. DOD, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors had no comments.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Defense and State, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Executive Director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and other interested parties. In addition, the report also will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions concerning this report, please contact either Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov or John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in enclosure II.



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Enclosures - 2

DOD Strategic Communication



***DOD Strategic Communication:
Integrating Foreign Audience Perceptions
into Policy Making, Plans, and Operations***

May 2012



Objectives

1. Describe the Department of Defense's (DOD) approach to strategic communication.
2. Identify initial steps that DOD has taken to implement this approach.
3. Discuss DOD's plans to reflect the role of its interagency partners in strategic communication.



Scope and Methodology

To conduct this engagement, we

- reviewed DOD documents defining and describing strategic communication, such as the *DOD Report on Strategic Communication* and the *2010 Quadrennial Defense Review*;
 - interviewed DOD officials involved in developing the initial actions that DOD has taken to implement its approach to strategic communication and in conducting information operations, to include the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Joint Staff, Special Operations Command, and Central Command; and
 - interviewed officials from the Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) to understand their role in DOD's approach to strategic communication.
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Summary

- DOD officials are seeking to approach strategic communication as a process that leaders, planners, and operators should follow to integrate audience and stakeholder perceptions into policy making, planning, and operations at every level.
 - DOD has taken some initial steps toward integrating the strategic communication process into its policy making, plans, and operations at every level, such as ensuring that top leadership is driving the effort.
 - DOD officials stated that the department plans to initially focus inward on clarifying its approach to strategic communication and then update guidance documents to reflect the roles of its interagency partners.
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Background



The *National Framework for Strategic Communication* Defines Strategic Communication Governmentwide

- Section 1055 of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009 required the President to submit a report on a comprehensive interagency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication.
- In response, the President submitted the *National Framework for Strategic Communication* in March 2010, which referred to strategic communication governmentwide as:
 - the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as
 - programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations¹ professionals.
- Moreover, the *National Framework for Strategic Communication* emphasizes the interagency nature of strategic communication and identifies the roles and responsibilities of various federal government departments and offices that work to coordinate communications and engagement programs and activities.

¹Information operations are the integrated employment of electronic warfare, computer network operations, military information support operations, military deception, and operations security, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting U.S. interests.

Background



***Joint Operational Planning* Defines Strategic Communication for DOD**

- According to Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning*, DOD defines strategic communication as:
 - Focused U.S. government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with and leveraging the actions of all instruments of national power.²

²Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 11, 2011).

Objective 1



DOD Is Seeking to Approach Strategic Communication as a Process

- DOD officials are seeking to approach strategic communication as a process that leaders, planners, and operators should follow to integrate audience and stakeholder perceptions into policy making, planning, and operations at every level.
- However, descriptions of strategic communication in the *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the *National Framework for Strategic Communication* characterize it differently. For example, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* describes strategic communication as the coordination of activities such as information operations and public affairs, among other things.

Objective 1



Varying Descriptions of Strategic Communication Have Created Confusion in DOD

- According to officials in OUSD-P, the varying descriptions of strategic communication have created confusion within the department.
 - The widespread misunderstanding and misapplication of the term strategic communication was described in a June 2011 memo by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
 - Officials added that strategic communication should not be considered the coordination of information operations and public affairs but rather the process of integrating issues of audience and stakeholder perception into policy making, planning, and operations at every level.

Objective 1



DOD Is Drafting an Instruction on Strategic Communication to Address Confusion

- DOD is drafting an instruction on strategic communication meant to clarify DOD's approach to strategic communication and help initiate a culture change throughout the department to view strategic communication as a process.
- According to officials, when the instruction is finalized, it will be directed to every leader, planner, and operator within DOD and will include mandatory actions for updating strategic planning documents, outreach, training and education. The instruction will explain the following concepts:
 - Strategic communication is not analogous to the mission of public affairs or information operations (or their coordination and deconfliction);
 - Leaders, planners, and operators should ensure that actions, words, and images are coordinated to avoid or diminish the gap between words and actions; and,
 - Key audience beliefs, perceptions, and reactions are crucial to the success of any strategy, policy, plan, operation, or activity, and must therefore be identified, understood, and, when appropriate, actively addressed.



Objective 1

DOD's Draft Instruction Would Clarify the Strategic Communication Process

Focus of strategic communication after instruction is completed:



Words and Actions



Current focus of DOD "communications"

- Key leader speeches and engagements
- Press conferences, off-the-record, and "background" interviews
- Press statements, articles, and websites
- Military information support operations
- Strategies and plans
- Directives, instructions, doctrine, manuals, and publications
- Agreements, both binding and nonbinding
- Deployments and kinetic/nonkinetic operations
- Basing and facilities
- Humanitarian and disaster assistance
- Exercises
- Defense meetings, including bilateral, regional, and international
- Acquisition and procurement
- Organization
- Research and development
- Conferences and seminars
- Maintenance and sustainment
- Education and training
- Testing and evaluation

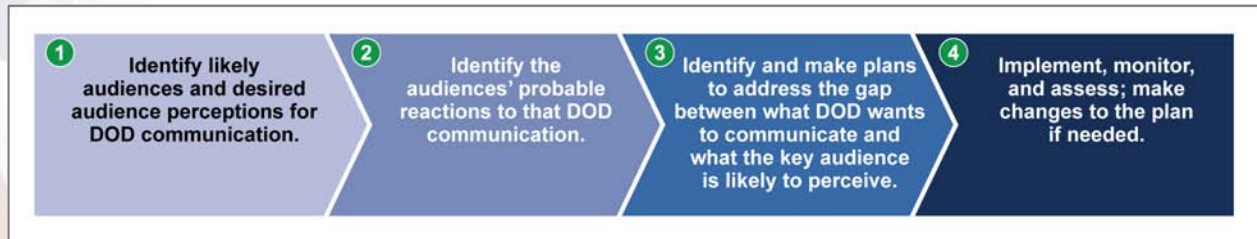
Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents.



Objective 1

DOD Is Drafting an Instruction on Strategic Communication to Address Confusion

- According to DOD officials, the draft instruction, when completed, would clarify the steps of the strategic communication process.



Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents.

- DOD officials responsible for coordinating the draft instruction's internal review and approval estimate the instruction will be completed in late spring or early summer 2012.

Objective 2



DOD Has Taken Initial Actions Toward Integrating Strategic Communication into Its Policy Making, Plans, and Operations

- DOD has taken some initial actions toward initiating a culture change to integrate the strategic communication process into its policy making, plans, and operations at every level.
- Our prior work on federal agency transformations identifies several key practices characteristic of successful agencywide transformation efforts, to include culture changes.³ These practices can provide a framework to help agencies transform themselves to be better prepared to meet twenty-first century challenges.
- DOD is demonstrating some of these practices, such as:
 - ensuring top leadership is driving the effort, and
 - establishing a purpose for the transformation.

³GAO, *Highlights of a GAO Forum: Mergers and Transformation: Lessons Learned for a Department of Homeland Security and Other Federal Agencies*, GAO-03-293SP (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 14, 2002).

Objective 2



Senior DOD Officials Are Responsible for Initiating and Driving the Culture Change

- In January 2011, the Secretary of Defense directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs to clarify the strategic communication process.
 - In response to this direction, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy assigned a senior advisor responsibility for global strategic engagement. This advisor also heads the Global Strategic Engagement Team and is responsible for initiating the culture shift needed to ensure that leaders, planners, and operators understand how words and actions are aligned and how they may be perceived.
 - According to DOD officials, the Secretary continues to fully support the finalization of the draft instruction and implementation of the culture change associated with it.
- In addition, the Global Strategic Engagement Team is responsible for guiding the draft DOD instruction through internal review and for acting as a liaison with other DOD components, as appropriate, to ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities for integrating the strategic communication process.

Objective 2



DOD Has Taken the Initial Action of Establishing a Purpose for the Transformation

- According to senior officials, DOD needs to transform how its personnel view strategic communication because communicating the right message to the right audience is crucial to the success of DOD's plans, policies, and operations.
- DOD has drafted the instruction that, according to officials, clarifies that strategic communication should be used by all leaders, planners, and policy makers to identify key audience perceptions and is different from DOD capabilities such as information operations.
- If the instruction is approved by the Secretary of Defense, it would be the formal guidance document for all DOD entities to follow for strategic communication policy.

Objective 2



DOD Also Identified Some Subsequent Actions to Implement Once the DOD Instruction Is Completed

- Specifically, officials said they will need to update documents, augment existing training, and perform outreach.
 - DOD officials have identified key DOD documents that will need to be updated or revised to reflect the final strategic communication instruction, including the *Guidance for the Employment of the Force*, the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, the combatant command theater campaign plans, and many other operational and tactical level planning guidance documents.
 - DOD officials recognize that they must engage the various entities within DOD that are responsible for training, including the military services and the combatant commands.
 - DOD officials have also begun considering the stakeholders they will need to brief on its new strategic communication instruction, including DOD components that have not been involved in the review and approval of the draft instruction and DOD's interagency partners.

Objective 3



DOD Plans to Reflect the Role of Interagency Partners in Future Guidance

- According to DOD officials, the DOD instruction represents DOD's effort to focus inward and establish how the department approaches strategic communication.
- More guidance will follow the instruction after it is finalized that will explain implementation of the strategic communication process, to include coordination with interagency partners.
 - DOD officials plan to prepare a manual or handbook on strategic communication that will, among other things, describe the role of DOD's interagency partners.
 - The DOD instruction will influence updates to Joint Staff publications, combatant commands' theater campaign plans, and operational plans.
 - Changes to these documents may not happen immediately because each document has its own review cycle and is owned by various components across DOD.

Objective 3



DOD Officials Recognize Interagency Partners Play an Important Role in the Strategic Communication Process

- According to DOD officials, coordinating with interagency partners is an important component of the strategic communication process.
 - For example, State and the intelligence community conduct audience analyses that DOD could use to support the strategic communication process, such as identifying likely audiences for DOD's communication.
- Officials we spoke with at DOD, State, USAID, and BBG discussed the importance of interagency coordination.
 - For example, Special Operations Command officials noted that they benefit from close coordination with State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and told us they meet with State to coordinate foreign audience polling and other resources.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

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Staff Acknowledgments

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