

# The Truth about Messaging

## Competition Requires Placing Information Objectives at the Center of All We Do

COL JOSHUA “MULE” KOSLOV

KATE McILVAINE

*The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.*

—Chinese Proverb

During the Korean War, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) launched an influence campaign claiming that the United States was responsible for outbreaks of bubonic plague, anthrax, cholera, and encephalitis in China and North Korea. Even before the age of the Internet, adversarial propagandists were able to spread this message globally using a multitude of vectors, including Western scientists, writers, and journalists.<sup>1</sup> These tactics resurfaced in 2020 as the PRC attempted to deflect blame for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sad truth is that the PRC currently enjoys an advantage in the information domain due to superior organization, unity of effort, and persistent narratives that set roots in cracks in the US narrative. While the US military has continued to treat operations in the information environment as something that can be tacked on to a “real” operation after the fact, the PRC has been employing information as a natural extension of state policy, directed against all audiences, even against its own people. In the US Air Force (USAF), public affairs and information operations have remained peripheral players orbiting the main mass of contingency operations, major exercises, and training opportunities. Even as “Pivot to the Pacific” and “Great-Power Competition” entered the common vernacular over the past decade, planners continued to execute the same routine events they had for years without actually altering the way they conceived and executed operations. Despite a growing national focus on the problem of competing with China, military planners remained satisfied with a model that ignores the steady-state messaging aspects of operations that can have immeasurable benefits during crises.

The Biden administration recently identified the PRC as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”<sup>2</sup> While the department and the nation have begun to

change the US approach by countering PRC rhetoric, we lag our adversary by decades; after squandering opportunities to build a cohesive model for integrating information effects into our operations, we simply cannot afford to delay any further. *It is time to place information objectives and cognitive effects at the center of all we do.* In this piece, we will discuss how to build a strategic messaging capability that yields real effects and then outline how recognizing the message as the center of gravity requires a refocus by the entire USAF. As emphasized in Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Charles Q. Brown's "Accelerate Change or Lose" directive, we are already far behind, and time is short—until every Airman believes that messaging *is* operations, we will not be a contender in competition or a champion in conflict.<sup>3</sup>

### **What Needs to Be Done Now**

The best time for the Air Force to develop a cross-functional strategic messaging capability to counter malign influence was 20 years ago. However, we did not. Instead, the Air Force focused on a stovepiped approach, limiting the service's ability to synchronize its operations and messaging. Opposing the PRC's information superiority requires reworking the method by which we plan, execute, and assess our operations throughout the theater. Starting under General Brown, and now under Gen Kenneth S. Wilsbach, PACAF Commander, the guidance is clear: *rather than bringing messaging in as an afterthought, information objectives must shape the operations we conduct from the point of conception and persist long after the jets have landed.*<sup>4</sup>

### **The Three Messaging Truths of Competition**

At PACAF, we believe strategic messaging in competition should be organized around three truths:

1. **The commander owns the narrative.** The narrative is driven by strategy, and no single office owns the message or the process through which the message is disseminated. Messaging is a cross-functional effort guided by the commander's intent and objectives.
2. **The narrative drives operations.** Information objectives must shape operations. Messaging is more than articles and pictures; every operation and activity sends a message and must be synchronized against command objectives and desired perceptions.

3. **The narrative is consistent, but messaging is dynamic.** Long-range planning builds effective message synchronization, but emergent events also require thoughtful, cross-functional responses that can only be achieved through established crisis communication procedures.

### ***Set the Conditions for Success***

Cognitive effects constitute the primary objective of competitive campaign activities, and *there is nothing we do that can be viewed outside the lens of competition*. The primary effects we strive for are cognitive effects or changing the perceptions of our adversaries, allies, partners, and bystanders. Viewed this way, it is clear that military operations should be driven by the message we wish to send to our competitors and teammates, as well as those watching from the sidelines.<sup>5</sup>

At PACAF, we have addressed some of the structural challenges posed by these requirements by creating an integrated Strategic Competition Team with O-6 leadership, located within the Directorate of Strategy and Plans (A5/8) to reflect the importance of strategic planning and long-range synchronization of competition operations, activities, and investments (OAI). Additionally, locating this effort within the A5/8 creates a valuable synergy with contingency planning to enhance synchronization of competition efforts with wartime scheme of maneuver and concepts of operations. As expressed in Messaging Truths #1 and #2, we recognize messaging does not just come from A5 and have developed proactive and reactive processes for cross-coordination and synchronization with A3 and PACAF Public Affairs to ensure that messaging drives operations.

Of course, making this change happen is more challenging than simply articulating what is required—the organization must adapt to facilitate an approach centered on cognitive effects and shifts in the information environment (IE). While there are vendors with technological solutions to this problem, we are convinced that people are more important than widgets. After all, we are discussing the goal of changing the minds of our adversaries—how are we to believe we can accomplish that if we cannot change the way our own staff thinks about the mission?

This implies that cultural change within our organizations is a crucial enabler of a shift to an information-centered mission concept; however, how do we accomplish this? British military historian B.H. Liddell Hart once said, “The only thing harder than getting a new idea into a military mind is to get an old idea out.”<sup>6</sup> Getting Airmen to think about strategic messaging as operations requires a major cultural shift. A few guiding change management principles should shape

the approach. First, it is vital to gain senior leadership buy-in. While the work is done at the action officer level, leadership needs to be empowered to set clear expectations and hold people accountable. Second, efforts must be focused on quick wins while building long-term proactive and reactive processes that support Messaging Truth #3. Securing early successes makes a big difference to the momentum of any organizational change. Lastly, change leaders should expect and plan to overcome resistance. Creating change that survives leadership and personnel transition takes an organized approach backed by guidance; communicate well and often how and why this shift is critical to the mission. In the following paragraphs, we will illustrate how messaging is integrated into operations at all points in the planning cycle with specific examples of PACAF successes.

### ***Blunt the Adversary's Narrative: Rapid Response to Volatile Events***

Execution requires careful consideration of the current situation and how it affects the message our operations send. Military activities are just one part of the message the nation as a whole sends—and in many ways is less consequential than diplomatic or economic effects. As the execution window for our operations approach, we must consider the strategic and operational environment and assess how it will magnify or contradict the intended information effects we designed the operation to create.

Our approach has yielded notable results already, across the planning horizon from current operations to long-term efforts. In the execution window, we established a cross-functional rapid response messaging team able to quickly react to developments in the IE with a tailored messaging plan advancing American interests. Previously, we discovered China was able to get an information response out in a crisis event in six to eight hours, while it often took the United States days or weeks. PACAF leaders directed their staff to close this gap by setting up a dedicated team of planners and information professionals able to rapidly craft a message supporting our objectives inside the adversary's decision cycle. A notable early success of this initiative came when Chinese and Russian bombers flew inside airspace monitored by the United States, Republic of Korea, and Japan in December 2020. Messaging products illuminating the speed of the friendly response and integration of efforts between allies countered any possible information gains by our adversaries.



**Figure 1. Rapid response.** PACAF messaging response to the December PRC–Russia bomber patrol emphasized the strength of our decades-long bilateral relationships.

### ***Just Submitting a Concept of Operations Is Not Enough: Messaging in Emergent Planning***

Task saturation permeates the lives of planners across the force (or at least the good ones). When guidance from higher headquarters demands a response in the form of a concept of operations (CONOP) or an order to subordinate units, these planners will give it their best but must apply economy of effort across competing tasks. This often leads to satisfying the letter of the task and moving it on to the next stage; this runs the risk of ignoring the messaging implications of the mission and method selected to achieve it. Unfortunately, higher headquarters often lack the understanding of the operating environment or the specific operational expertise required to incorporate effects on perceptions of adversaries and partners into their guidance; so, it falls to operational-level planners to work through the effects of their operations in the information environment. In most contexts, the best that can be expected is for public affairs, and possibly information operations, to tack on a messaging concept at the end of the CONOPs, but rarely are they significantly involved in the actual development of the operation. This absolutely

must change—in strategic competition, the message is the entire point of the operation, so it cannot exist simply as a backup slide.

Since its stand-up in 2019, PACAF's Strategic Competition Team has been shaping the information environment by leading the messaging surrounding the Air Force's shift from a Continuous Bomber Presence structure in the Indo-Pacific to a more agile, responsive, and operationally unpredictable Bomber Task Force model. This transition posed significant messaging risk because it had the potential to make it appear as though the USAF was pulling back from an operational commitment in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, PACAF proactively and adroitly crafted an information campaign that illuminated the reality: the shift to rotational deployment complemented by long-range flights from the mainland United States poses a greater operational dilemma for China and Russia and highlights the truly global reach of American strategic bombers. In response, China's *Global Times* decried PACAF's efforts as "despised strategically, [but] respected tactically."<sup>7</sup>

### ***When You Have Got the Time, Use It: Messaging for Future Plans***

In longer-term planning, staffs all too often squander the breathing room they have to conceive of new activities, falling back on normal force rotations in support of annual exercises and neglecting to design new operations. Rather than leaving the business of designing force employment to those who will have to execute it in two to three years, our planners should have an opportunistic campaign mindset, conceiving of new activities that can be synchronized across time and space to link our strategic objectives to the tasks we assign our forces. This can seem challenging given that force allocation processes typically take place multiple years before operation execution, but dynamic force employment provides a valuable tool to allow planners the forces needed to take advantage of emerging opportunities; anticipated force availability should be a consideration in planning, not an excuse to avoid planning.

Looking forward, PACAF is developing longer-range influence-led campaigns, designed to synchronize OAIs to intentionally shape adversary perceptions. Over the next several years, PACAF's operations and exercises will deliberately focus attention on particular capabilities; these concepts of operations will be built from the ground up with information objectives in mind and will be fully integrated with joint and interagency messaging campaigns to demonstrate the US ability to continue operating as it chooses in the theater, even in the face of advanced threats.



## ***If You Do Not Assess It, Did It Happen?: The Importance—and Elusive Nature—of Assessments***

Finally, following execution we must ensure we conduct quantitative and qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of the operation against our desired effects. While this is absolutely imperative, it is also incredibly difficult. Consequently, most military commands neglect this function or expend their efforts on measures of performance pertaining to how much effort they put into an operation rather than the changes it has made in the operational environment. The difficulty of this effort is amplified by challenges inherent in assessing changes in adversaries' and partners' views; often the indicators of such changes lag by months if not years. Aggregated through multiple operations and other whole-of-government efforts rather than singular in nature, assessments require a concerted effort to track over time.

The time to build our assessments capabilities is now—and we need help. Never before has the USAF had the access and ability to leverage an unimaginable volume of social media data, intelligence, and advanced analytics to provide so much insight in the IE. While our team has made progress in its ability to understand trends in public discussion and perception relating to efforts like the Bomber Task Force initiative and ally and partner engagements, this is the area in which we need the most help. We are simply not sustainably resourced to assess steady-state messaging, and currently the broader force and national security establishment is not either. We believe this is an appropriate growth area for the intelligence community and combatant commands to ensure assessment of the IE is consistent across operating forces.

### **Spreading the Message: Implications for the Air Force**

While we have had a great number of initial successes in PACAF, we do not think we have all the answers, and we welcome a big-tent approach in building this out across the force. As we have been establishing this process, we have observed the following roadblocks in institutionalizing this approach and believe they apply to all organizations across the force that are grappling with efforts to relearn strategic competition. While we welcome all other organizations' input and support, we also believe that the demands levied on us as a USINDOPACOM service component command impose a unique responsibility in the messaging battle against China.

There are a variety of organizations around the Air Force and the joint force discussing strategic competition and its messaging component, but at PACAF we are actively integrating it into the competition we execute every day. Headquarters

Air Force (HAF) A3 has provided an excellent framework for conceiving of Operations in the Information Environment, as well as matching objectives with the various tools available to affect the environment, but HAF A3 does not exercise day-to-day control over operating forces or actively plan and direct operations. In the end, while HAF will be responsible for resourcing and programming decisions that will either limit or expand our capability to conduct the battle in the information environment, the responsibility to execute the fight will lie with the major commands (MAJCOM) and numbered air forces that answer to combatant commanders.

On the numbered air force front, the establishment of 16th Air Force as the operational organization responsible for integrating information warfare effects is a major move forward. However, chain of command still matters, and 16th Air Force does not report to PACAF or INDOPACOM. While they provide invaluable supporting capability to efforts within the Indo-Pacific, ultimately it is PACAF that is responsible for planning and integrating Air Force operations in the theater. We have an obligation to our commanders to ensure that we are considering information effects in all that we do, rather than outsourcing it to another headquarters.

We addressed a variety of issues here, ranging from early successes to where we still need to see progress, but we fully recognize this will be a years-long effort across the Air Force and the Joint Force to institutionalize a new way of thinking. A single MAJCOM, or even the Air Force or entire Department of Defense, cannot counter the PRC's narrative on its own. We need to deliberately and thoughtfully integrate our efforts into a whole-of-government approach (supported by the National Security Council) to ensure legacy habits and stovepiping do not dull the impact of our government's information response. In addition to harnessing this whole-of-government effort, USAF needs to design a responsive process for synchronizing messaging across the force so our messaging activities amplify, not contradict, one another. Overall, the creation of Strategic Competition Teams across all MAJCOMs lays the foundation for an organization that prioritizes messaging as the central organizing principle of operations; this is a great start, because with the breadth of this task, we simply cannot afford to delay any longer.

### **Call to Action**

The challenge is clear: in China, we face a determined competitor with the capability to back its messaging with real power, globally. Our neglect of messaging capabilities and processes in the past decades has left us dangerously vulnerable. The Air Force has taken the first steps to address this shortfall, but truly contesting



the narrative will require a wholesale change in culture, and unfortunately, we do not have the time to await generational change on this issue. USAF senior leaders—not just in the Indo-Pacific but around the globe—need to build their strategic messaging capabilities around the three truths: the commander owns the narrative, the narrative drives operations, and, while the narrative is consistent, messaging is dynamic. Simply “demonstrating resolve” or “advancing proficiency” is no longer enough. Serious competition requires serious planning and identification of how one intends to change minds and then the follow up to honestly assess how we are doing. We should have done this work years ago, but the second-best time is now. 🚀

### **Col Joshua “Mule” Koslov**

Colonel Koslov is the Chief of the Strategy, Plans and Competition Division at Headquarters Pacific Air Forces. Prior to serving at PACAF, Colonel Koslov earned a master’s degree in national security studies from the Naval War College Mahan Advanced Research program, focused on deterrence and competitive strategies. A USAF Weapons School Distinguished Graduate, he has commanded the 755th Operations Support Squadron and twice commanded the 43rd Expeditionary Electronic Combat Squadron supporting Central Command combat operations. In his next assignment, he will be the Commander of the 609th Air Operations Center, Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar.

### **Kate McIlvaine**

Ms. McIlvaine is a message synchronization lead on Pacific Air Force’s Strategic Competition Team. She has a background in strategic communication and government affairs. She is an associate at Booz Allen Hamilton.

### **Notes**

1. Glenn Tiffert, et al., “Telling China’s Story: The Chinese Communist Party’s Campaign to Shape Global Narratives,” *Hoover Institution*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.hoover.org/>.
2. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.
3. Charles Q. Brown, “*Accelerate Change or Lose*,” US Air Force, August 2020, <https://www.af.mil/>.
4. PACAF Commander’s Messaging Strategy, April 2020.
5. PACAF Strategic Competition Framework, May 2020
6. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), v.
7. “The US Military B-1B Strategic Bomber ‘Passed By’ Taiwan to the East China Sea and Was Exposed for the First Time in Waters Outside Taiwan!,” *Global Times (Huanqiao Shibao)*, 4 May 2020, <https://3w.huanqiu.com/>.