

József Lajos Nemeth<sup>1</sup>

## **Defining Strategic Communication: An Almost Impossible Challenge, But Perhaps There Is Still A Solution<sup>2</sup>**

[DOI 10.17047/Hadtud.2021.31.E.162](https://doi.org/10.17047/Hadtud.2021.31.E.162)

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks the term „strategic communication” became widely used by political and military leaders as well. Shortly, it became a kind of a ‘buzzword’. As a result, today there are many definitions in use to describe it. However, we are still facing lots of challenges if we wish to grasp the real meaning of this term. For a better understanding, and built on the research done so far, the author presents a possible interpretation of strategic communication based on some new methodologies and suggests a new approach and definition and, by his opinion, the main actors are the states and the armed forces.

KEYWORDS: strategic communication; people; tools; history; conceptual approaches; research; redefining

### ***A stratégiai kommunikáció meghatározása: csaknem lehetetlen kihívás, de talán mégis van rá megoldás***

*A 2001-es terrortámadások után egyre többet használják a „stratégiai kommunikáció” kifejezést politikai és katonai vezetők egyaránt. Ennek eredményeként napjainkban sok definíció használatos annak leírására, noha még mindig jelentős kihívásokkal nézünk szembe akkor, ha azt annak mélységében kívánjuk megérteni. A jobb megértés érdekében, valamint az eddig elvégzett kutatások alapján, a szerző a stratégiai kommunikáció megértését – különösen intézményi kötődése miatt – az állam és a haderő vonatkozó erőfeszítései alapján látja célravezetőnek és a további kutatások szempontjából jelentősnek. A szerző egyes vonatkozó példák rövid, lényegre törő bemutatása alapján arra következtetésre jut, hogy a témakör tartalmi összetevőinek és legfontosabb szereplőinek az állam és a haderő tekinthetők, továbbá javaslatot tesz egy új megközelítésre, egyúttal kialakít egy új meghatározást is.*

*KULCSSZAVAK: stratégiai kommunikáció; eszközök, történelem; fogalmi megközelítés; meghatározó dimenziók*

### **Introduction**

First of all, one can assume that today, in early 2021, we are much smarter in this very complex field of studies than the original authors were in 2007. The reason is very simple: in this topic

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior research fellow, Department of Electronic Warfare, Faculty of Military Sciences and Officer Training, University of Public Service; e-mail: nemeth.jozsef@uni-nke.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2819-7362>

<sup>2</sup> „This article is Supported BY the ÚNKP-20-5-NKE-108 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology and supported by the Janos Bolyai Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences”



– after conducting a very detailed and thorough literature research – we can easily determine that hundreds of articles, books, remarks, notes and other sources have been produced over the past nearly over the past nearly fifteen years. On the other hand, however, it still seems an impossible challenge to find a ‘working’ definition of what is or what can be labelled as strategic communication?

The term ‘strategic communication’<sup>3</sup> has a military origin, namely its use can be traced back to the Pentagon in 2002, when the term was connected to the so called GWOT (Global War On Terror) strategy launched by the George W. Bush administration right after the 9/11 attacks. At that time, the Pentagon officers (Brig. Gen. Jack Catton, Rhett Hernandez and Ted Tzavellas) wished to coin a term that everyone working in the field of communication would be willing to use as the means to inform and influence key audiences.<sup>4</sup> The other aim was to bring together experts working in every field of communication. This newly initiated term generated a series of misunderstandings for the commanders who were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, but some very high-ranking leaders tried to provide a comprehensive understanding of it in some of their publications.<sup>5</sup>

Just five years later, in 2007, the International Journal of Strategic Communication was launched by the international academic publisher Taylor & Francis.<sup>6</sup> In the first issue there was a commonly used definition provided by some authors. “Strategic communication was defined as „the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”.<sup>7</sup> I think, this definition was and still is comprehensive enough to include various other fields of academics, other possible business related, governmental or non-governmental, even international organizations (see, for example, the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), among others.

### ***Database research results***

After conducting a database search of the EBSCO’s International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center<sup>8</sup> focused on the keyword of ‘strategic communication’, and dividing the findings into ten-year periods the following diagram can be created:

---

<sup>3</sup> The author is aware that the term ‘strategic communications’ has different meaning depending on the context or on the user as well. Here is a great example based on the source of the Cambridge Dictionary: „the systems for moving people and goods between one place and another, such as roads, trains, planes, and ships. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communications>. Downloaded: 24 March 2021. For example, the academic sphere prefers ‘Strategic communication’, while the more technical sphere prefers to use the term ‘strategic communications’.

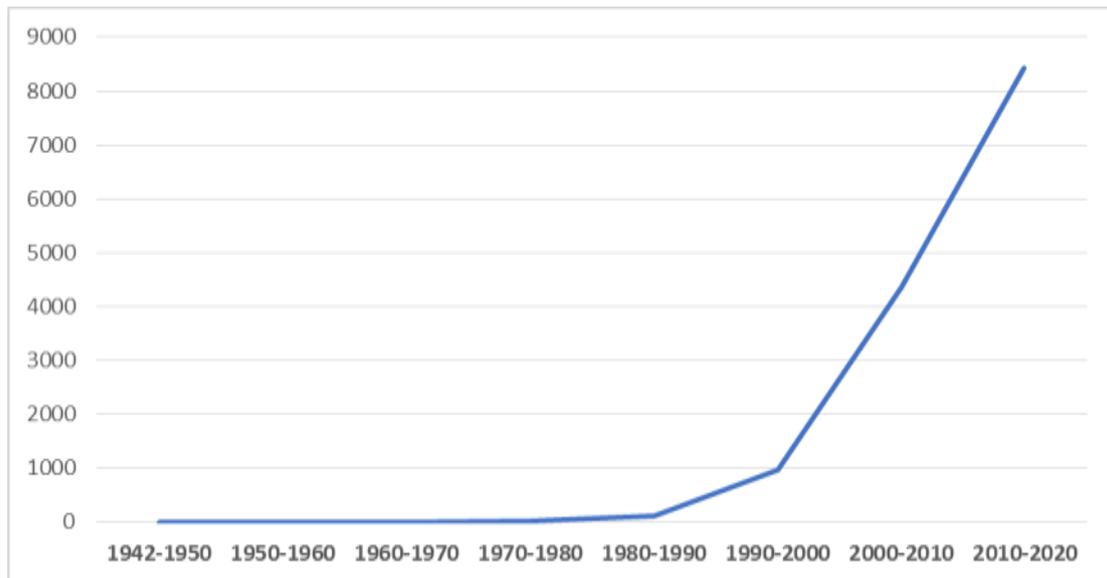
<sup>4</sup> Farwell 2012, 206.

<sup>5</sup> Stavridis 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hstc20/current> Downloaded: 04 March 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Kirk, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Betteke, Verčič, Dejan and Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy 2007.

<sup>8</sup> <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/> Downloaded: 04 March 2021.



*Figure 1.*

***The results of database search***

(Explanations: the horizontal axis shows past decades from the first result [1942]; the vertical axis shows the number of related articles based on the above mentioned database [the EBSCO's International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center] done searching for the keywords „strategic communication”. The vertical axis shows the number of results. The figure was created by the author.)

As we can see the term ‘strategic communication’ had already been in use as early as in the 1940s<sup>9</sup> but the ‘big boom’ started just after the 9/11 attacks, and in the period of 2010-2020 we can find more than 8,400 relating articles or publications, which clearly proves that this field became more and more the focus of interest. In 2017, some experts defined strategic communication as a form of communication that is driven by an expected outcome. That very outcome can be attitudinal, behavioral, persuasive or knowledge-related”.<sup>10</sup> Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide add „that from a research perspective, strategic communication is an emerging field of knowledge bridging established research fields such as public relations, organizational communication and marketing communication.”<sup>11</sup> James P. Farwell defines strategic communication in his excellent book as the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies or to achieve objectives.”<sup>12</sup> Patrick Sellers outlines in his book, which focuses on the US Congress’ strategic communication, that” a central element is the message, which I define as the issue and arguments about the issue that a politician promotes. In launching a strategic communication campaign and promoting the message, the politician hopes to win a favorable outcome related to the issue.”<sup>13</sup> Christopher Paul argues in his book: „For me, strategic communication is coordinating the things you do and say in support of your

<sup>9</sup> Kirk 1942, 762–765.

<sup>10</sup> Dudo and Lee 2017, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Falkheimer 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Farwell: 2012, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Sellers 2010, 10.

objectives”.<sup>14</sup> Young Joon Lim explains in his article that „it will not be feasible to share a common concept of strategic communication until the very representative and unified consensus is accepted among the strategic communication community”.<sup>15</sup>

### *Interests of different states*

I am convinced that there is a need to clarify some states’ viewpoint on strategic communication, too, so in the followings I am to provide some interesting approaches of some other states in alphabetical order:

Firstly, there is a very interesting article, which focuses on branding as an element of **Brazilian** Strategic communication.<sup>16</sup> The authors argue that „the Brazil brand has incomplete relationships and conceptual divergences with the theory”.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of **China**, based on some descriptions, we can confirm, that strategic communication was practiced in many ways already in 2013; according to Dr. Jingfang Liu, the Chinese practice includes strategic planning, leadership and decision making, internal and external communication, Integrated Marketing Communication, CSR communication, ethical principles, and internationalization strategy.<sup>18</sup>

The **Canadian** approach: „Over the past decades, Canada has taken evolving strategic communication (StratCom) measures to counter foreign propaganda – often violent, extremist and undemocratic – disseminated by non-state and state actors. To this end, the Canadian government has employed both hard and soft tactics and strategies through legislation, community outreach and military operations.”<sup>19</sup>

A **French** author explained: „Strategic Communication (Stratcom), more commonly known as “influence communication” in France, remains the poor relation of military efforts. This approach to communication consists in optimizing a common discourse among different actors (joint operations, inter-ministerial, etc.) with messages adapted to different targets.”<sup>20</sup> In another technical research publication focuses on the French strategic communication from NATO’s viewpoint and methodology.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of **Germany**, I failed to find any relevant literature, but – based on the fact that Germany is a stable NATO member – I assume that they follow the Alliance (NATO) guidance and approach in strategic communication.

In the case of **Italy**, my research focusing on any official or governmental level findings proved to be unsuccessful, however, there is an interesting article, which connects strategic communication to the public administration. In this paper, the author explains: „The majority of public communication officers in the Italian public administration are not involved in the strategic management of public administrations but rather contribute to operational activities.

---

<sup>14</sup> Christopher 2011, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Lim 2015, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Mariutti and Janaina 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jingfang 2013. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Bentzen and Perić 2016. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Mielcarek 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Reding, Weed and Ghez 2010.

They report directly to the senior manager of their department/unit, and they use a mixed model of public relations”.<sup>22</sup>

**Japan** argues: „Despite rising tensions in East Asia, the Japanese government has not adopted a comprehensive policy, doctrine, or institution for strategic communication (StratCom) to date. The lack of a formal StratCom concept or framework, however, that does not mean that Japan is not engaged in strategic communication”.<sup>23</sup>

In an interesting article written by MONROE PRICE with the title of „**Iran** and the Soft War” is the author explains „I characterize strategic communications as, most dramatically, an investment by an external source in methods to alter basic elements of a societal consensus”.<sup>24</sup>

In a monograph written by Nathan D. Ginos, we can get some impact about the Securitization of Russian Strategic Communication. He claims „that the Russian Federation appears to have learned some hard lessons related to strategic communication”. After the dismantling of Soviet government structures following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian government struggled to cope with the difficulties of government transparency associated with conversion to a government resembling those of Western democratic states.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The visualization of the term „strategic communication”***

As a researcher and professor, I am convinced that sometimes visualization can talk better and more about this specific areas’ evolution, like in our issue of strategic communication. In the figures below we can see some significant changes from 2015 until 2019. In *figure 2* of the left side from 2015 we can see that many different fields had already applied this term with the content referring to their own specific area/interest.<sup>26</sup> In *figure 3* on the right side from 2019 we can see the NATO visualization, which includes many military, political or commercial aspects.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Valentini 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Aoi 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Price 2012, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ginos 2010, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Lim 2015, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Hayden 2019, 21.



### *The growing importance of influence and persuasion*

After a comprehensive literature and scientometric research, I realized and got convinced that the original definition from 2007 does not fulfil the current need for a new term.

As a hopefully effective solution and methodology, I decided to use a mathematical method: namely, the so-called 'lowest common multiple'. As a result, I found some common (joint) points, based on which we can create a more appropriate **and working** (!) definition/approach of strategic communication for the present. The list of joint points or basic principles is as follows:

1. Complex and integrative visibility is necessary.
2. It is not enough just to understand and use some parts of it.
3. It is a complex system, so the holistic approach is the most effective.
4. Persuasion, influence, information are of key importance.
5. It is important to achieve behavior that is favorable to us.
6. Measurability and feedback are very favorable.

Then, on January 29, 2019, scientometric research of English-language sources was done in the EBSCO database available at the Metropolitan University Library, based on a search for the keyword 'strategic communication' as well as that of full texts, taking all sources into account. It yielded approximately 95 results:

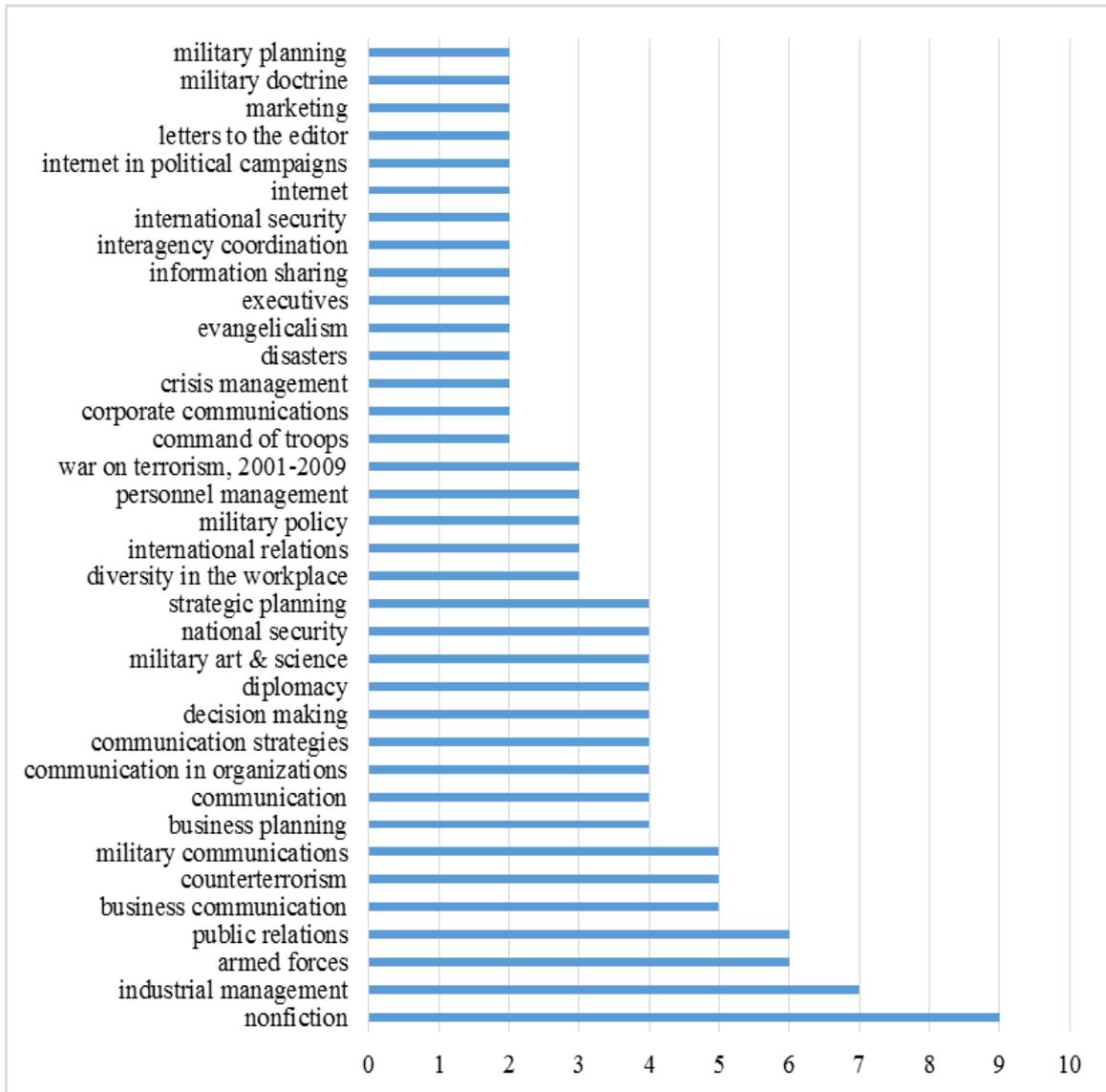


Figure 4.

**Results of a scientometric database search.**

(Source: EBSCO database – The figure was created by the author.)

As we can see, in 2019 we could find numerous fields related to this term: it became rather a multi- and interdisciplinary buzzword. Such a feature of this field is proven by the bulky volume of Routledge Publisher as well.<sup>32</sup>

The past 15 years have also highlighted that strategic communication is an area that requires a multi- and interdisciplinary attention. And last, but not least taken into consideration lessons learned from social media and network science, having been complicated all of these by the extremely rapid changes in communication technologies, we can try to create (not really define) a useable terminology for strategic communication.

<sup>32</sup> Holtzhausen and Zerfass 2019.

## Conclusion

Finally, as a result, I consider strategic communication as a holistic mindset, in which the dominant factor is the conscious exchange of information, by which we can persuade, influence, or inform selected audiences in order to achieve changes in their behavior in a way that is beneficial for us. In our days, I consider the main actors in strategic communication are the state and the armed forces.

## REFERENCES

- Aoi, Chiyuki 2017. *Japanese strategic communication: Its significance as a political tool, Defence Strategic Communications*. ISSN 2500-9478, Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE. Date of download: 18 April 2021. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/76876>
- Naja Bentzen and Perič, Lana 2016. *Canada's strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda, briefing, October 2016*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Date of download: 18 April 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/589809/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)589809\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/589809/EPRS_BRI(2016)589809_EN.pdf)
- Christopher, Paul 2011. *Strategic Communication Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*. Santa Barbara, USA: Praeger.
- Dudo Anthon, Lee, Ann Kahlor (ed.) 2017. *Strategic Communication*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644943>
- European External Action Service: Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force. Downloaded: 04 March 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en)
- Falkheimer, Jesper; Heide, Mats: 2018. *Strategic Communication*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315621555>
- Farwell, James P. 2012. *Persuasion and power: The Art of Strategic Communication*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Maj. Ginos Nathan 2010. *The Securitization of Russian Strategic Communication*. Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA536578>
- Hallahan, Kirk, Holtzhausen, Derina, van Ruler, Betteke, Verčič, Dejan and Sriramesh. Downloaded: 04 March 2021. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/>
- Hayden, Leonie 2019. Strategic Communications Universe. In *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*. NATO STRATCOMM COE, 27 December 2019. Riga. Downloaded: 19 April 2021. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/80810>

[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en) Downloaded: 04 March 2021.

Derina Holtzhausen, Ansgar Zerfass 2019. *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*. New York: Routledge. Downloaded: 04 March 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hstc20/current> ,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511642289>

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communications>, Downloaded: 24 March 2021.

*International Journal of Strategic Communication* Date of download: 04 March 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hstc20/current>

Dr. Jingfang, Liu 2013. "Strategic Communication in China." *School of Journalism* (Fudan University) Date of download: 18 April 2021. <http://www.xwxy.fudan.edu.cn/dm/userfiles/1/files/Strategic%20Communication%20Syllabus%20v2%20-Jingfang%20Liu.pdf>

Kirk, Grayson 1942. "Strategic communications in the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs* July 1942, 762–765.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/20029192>

Krishnamurty, Nagaiyar 2007. "Defining Strategic Communication." *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1: 1, 3–35.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>

Lim, Young Joon 2015. "Theorizing Strategic Communication in Parsimony from the U.S. government perspective." *KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 3 (1): 1–15. Downloaded: 18 April 2021. <http://real.mtak.hu/25066/1/131.pdf>

<https://doi.org/10.17646/KOME.2015.11>

Mariutti Fabiana Gondim and Janaina de Moura Engracia Giraldo 2013. *The Communication Strategies for the Brazil Brand in the United States of America*. Universidade de São Paulo. Downloaded: 18 April 2021.

<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/5018575.pdf>

<https://doi.org/10.3232/GCG.2013.V7.N1.02>

Mielcarek, Romain 2018. "French defense: Behind in the field of strategic communication." Downloaded: 18 April 2021. <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-les-champs-de-mars-2018-1-page-37.htm>

<https://doi.org/10.3917/lcdm.030.0159>

NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: About Strategic Communications. Downloaded: 04 March 2021. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-strategic-communications>

Monroe Price 2012. "Iran and the Soft War." *International Journal of Communication* Downloaded: 18 April 2021. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/231833929.pdf>

Reding, Anaïs, Weed Kristin, Ghez Jeremy J. 2010. *NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its relevance for France*. RAND Corporation, 2010, Santa Monica, CA,

USA: The French Ministry of Defence. Downloaded: 18 April 2021.  
[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2010/RAND\\_TR855.2.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2010/RAND_TR855.2.pdf).

Sellers, Patrick 2010. *Cycles of Spin Strategic Communication in the U.S. Congress*. Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511642289>

Stavridis, James G. 2007. "Strategic Communication and National Security." *Joint Force Quarterly* 2007: III. Downloaded: 04 March 2021.

<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a575204.pdf>

Valentini Chiara 2013. "Public Relations in the Public Sector: The Role of Strategic Communication in the Italian Public Administration." *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management* n. 92 (Settembre-Dicembre): 93–113. Downloaded: 18 April 2021.  
<https://www.sijm.it/public-relations-in-the-public-sector-the-role-of-strategic-communication-in-the-italian-public-administration/>

United Nations Department of Global Communications: Strategic Communications. Downloaded: 04 March 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/department-global-communications/strategic-communications>