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Security Nexus Perspective

FIVE QUESTIONS COMMANDERS MUST ASK THEIR PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICERS IN AN ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Integrating Public Affairs as a Decisive Maneuver Element in the Modern Information Environment

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Abstract

Integrated deterrence depends on the narrative believed by competitors, partners, and the public, placing Public Affairs (PA) at the center of the information environment. Despite investments in cyber and space, PA remains under-resourced even as it shapes the modern battlespace. This article argues that in an era of continuous information contests, PA must be treated as a maneuver element. To achieve this, commanders must engage their Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) with 5 critical questions. These questions address how the unit's narrative supports integrated deterrence; how to defend the information space from adversary influence and AI-driven manipulation; what behavioral changes are desired from target audiences; how PA is integrated with the Information Joint Function and operational planning; and whether the PAO is empowered with the necessary resources and authority. Asking these questions ensures PA is postured to defend the information space and advance mission success in alignment with national strategy.

Integrated deterrence isn't just about posture, readiness, or capability—it's also about the story that competitors, partners, and the public believe is true. Public Affairs (PA) increasingly sits at the center of that narrative space. While the U.S. invests heavily in advanced capabilities in domains such as cyber, space, and electronic warfare, Public Affairs remains comparatively under-resourced, even as it shapes public trust, partner perception, and adversary calculus every day. In an era where information is contested continuously, PA should be treated as a maneuver element. To do that, commanders must engage their Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) with the right questions.

The information environment has become an active, contested domain where strategic competition with major powers—including China and Russia—and non-state actors plays out daily. The 2025 National Security Strategy focuses on preserving American security, sovereignty, and prosperity by aligning national power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and industrial—to protect U.S. interests and maintain American strength in a competitive world. Concepts in recent defense strategies, including integrated deterrence, reinforce the need to use every instrument of national power in a coordinated way, including how the United States communicates. PAOs are no longer just spokespersons; they are essential staff advisors who help implement national strategy through precise, timely communication. To ensure communication functions as a maneuver element, commanders should ask their PAOs these five critical questions.

1. How does our unit narrative support integrated deterrence and strategic competition?

The 2025 National Security Strategy emphasizes ensuring that America remains the strongest and most successful nation by protecting core interests, safeguarding sovereignty, and using available means—military and non-military—to achieve those ends. The military's role in this framework includes contributing to deterrence, strengthening alliances, and shaping a favorable information environment. Every public communication should reflect this broader strategic context. Commanders should assess how unit messaging reinforces allied and partner unity, supports fair burden-sharing, demonstrates credible strength, and signals readiness to compete and deter across the spectrum of conflict. They must also ensure that unit themes align with higher-headquarters priorities, including technological and industrial advantage, rapid readiness, and regional stability.

2. How are we defending our information space against adversary influence, misinformation, and AI-driven manipulation?

The digital environment is a persistent battlespace where state and non-state actors can distort imagery, impersonate official accounts, or amplify false narratives using increasingly sophisticated tools, including artificial intelligence. Commanders must understand how their PA teams detect, mitigate, and counter these efforts. This includes:

- **Defensive capabilities:** Tools and processes to identify manipulated or AI-generated content and coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting the command or its mission.
- **Pre-bunking and transparency:** Pre-bunking strategies that release accurate information before adversaries can inject false narratives, and transparent communication that builds credibility over time.
- **Platform security and credibility:** Protecting official websites and social media accounts from hacking, impersonation, or unauthorized changes that could damage trust.

Defending the information space is no longer optional; it is integral to readiness and mission assurance.

3. What behavioral or decisional change do we want from our target audiences?

PA effectiveness should be measured by impact, not just reach or follower counts. Every communication effort must be tied to a desired behavior or decision. Commanders should identify the specific outcome they want to achieve—whether increasing cyber-talent recruitment, strengthening partner engagement, supporting host-nation cooperation, or shaping regional public sentiment. Measures of effectiveness might include application and retention rates, shifts in sentiment analysis, media framing, or changes in partner participation and responsiveness. PAOs should integrate this assessment data into planning cycles to refine operations, demonstrate impact, and inform resource decisions over time.

4. How is Public Affairs integrated with the Information Joint Function and operational planning?

Information is now recognized as a joint function alongside command and control, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment, reflecting the centrality of information in modern operations. Public Affairs is a key information-related capability within this framework and is essential to operations in the information environment and to gaining information advantage. U.S. Air Force Doctrine Commanders should ensure that PA is integrated early in planning and execution, not bolted on at the end. This means:

- PA actions appear in the unit's synchronization matrix and operational timelines.
- PA messaging complements, rather than conflicts with, Information Operations such as Military Information Support Operations, cyber operations, and electronic warfare.
- PAOs have a seat in the Information Cell or equivalent forum to provide real-time assessments of information risks and opportunities.

When PA is integrated from the outset, communication becomes a force multiplier and a deliberate part of combined arms in the information environment, rather than a reactive function.

5. Have I empowered the PAO with the resources and release authority required for a 24/7 competitive environment?

Information moves at the speed of networks, not at the speed of traditional staff processes. Commanders must equip PAOs with the authority and resources needed to respond rapidly and credibly. This includes:

- **Clear commander's intent:** Well-understood priorities, red lines, and desired information effects that guide decentralized action.
- **Standing release authority:** Pre-established authorities for routine events and predictable crisis scenarios so PAOs are not paralyzed by coordination delays when timely communication is essential.
- **Modern tools and professional capacity:** Secure networks, modern content production tools, and monitoring capabilities to understand and influence the information environment in real time.

Assigning the most capable communicators—regardless of rank—to PA positions strengthens narrative advantage, ensures more accurate representation of operations, and improves the unit's ability to compete in fast-moving information contests.

Conclusion

In today's strategic competition, the information environment is a decisive arena of national power. The 2025 National Security Strategy underscores the need for a coherent, realistic linkage between ends and means to keep America secure, prosperous, and strong. Commanders who integrate and empower their PAOs enhance their ability to shape narratives, counter adversary influence, and support broader national objectives, including deterrence and alliance management. By asking these five questions and returning to them quarterly by acting on the answers, leaders ensure their PA teams are prepared to defend the information space and advance mission success in alignment with national strategy and modern doctrine.



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February 2026