

EUCOM TASK FORCE

Kurt Volker

June 2011

Increasing Outreach, Public Understanding and Support for NATO across the Transatlantic Community

Fixing NATO's public support problem requires the personal commitment of allied leaders (from Prime Ministers on down); tough decisions on resources, capabilities, and operations in order to restore NATO's credibility; and identifying how NATO's actions directly improve the lives of citizens in NATO countries. NATO must be seen as addressing the right issues, successfully, in a way that citizens of allied countries would feel proud to say "This is My NATO."

NATO's PR Problem

It is a constant refrain that NATO needs to strengthen its public base of support in order to sustain practical support for national contributions to military operations, adequate levels of defense spending, further enlargement, and growth into new, 21st century security missions. And likewise, in the absence of such public support, contributions to operations are minimal, budgets cut, enlargement deferred, and new missions only minimally adopted, if at all. The result has been a highly traditional (if not outmoded), resource-starved, territorial- and military-minded NATO.

With this diagnosis, the frequent prescription is to increase NATO's public diplomacy outreach in an effort to build public support and reshape this dispiriting playing field. The record of cards already played in this effort includes support for Atlantic Treaty Associations, speeches by the Secretary General and other senior NATO officials, policy conferences, youth conferences, "viral video" postings, research projects,

The Atlantic Council's Strategic Advisors Group and the Institute for National Security Studies at the National Defense University launched a project in 2010-2011 to assess the future roles, missions and tasks of the United States European Command and how it relates to NATO. The study assesses in particular how the new NATO Strategic Concept and other initiatives launched at the November 2010 NATO Lisbon summit might impact EUCOM and its future. The study brought together leading experts from the United States and Europe for three workshop discussions in Washington to inform the production of a series of issue papers offering recommendations for EUCOM. The views expressed in these papers are those of the authors themselves and do not necessarily represent the views of EUCOM, the National Defense University or the Atlantic Council.

the Madeleine Albright-led 'Group of Experts,' and the new NATO Strategic Concept itself.

While these have been valiant efforts, one must honestly assess that they have not been successful in addressing the public perception/public support problem. Allied publics want to get out of Afghanistan and are skeptical of other expeditionary missions. Allied governments are slashing defense spending. The United States is drastically reducing its force posture in Europe and seeking to eliminate Joint

Kurt Volker is a Managing Director, International at the BGR Group and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins SAIS. He is also a Senior Advisor to the Atlantic Council's International Security Program and a member of the Council's Strategic Advisors Group. A former career member of the United States Senior Foreign Service, he served as the U.S. Ambassador to NATO from 2008-2009.

Produced in cooperation with

Forces Command, which had been the United States' principal link to Allied Command Transformation. Further NATO enlargement is on a far back burner. And despite using the language of a "comprehensive approach," nations are interested mainly in cutting NATO's headquarters structures, rather than reinvesting in new, civil-military capacities.

Not Just Communications

NATO is not unique in its public relations predicament. A fallacy common to all institutions with lackluster public support – from U.S. Presidential Administrations to corporations to international organizations – is to think that the problem is communications itself. "If only we got our message out better, people would understand..." What such institutions must accept, however, is that actually, people do understand. Their lives are driven by other factors, and if the organizations are not seen as actively addressing those issues, the organizations seem scarcely relevant, and thus not worth the expense of mental energy and scarce resources.

People are remarkably effective arbiters of their own self-interest. If an institution hurts them – or is irrelevant to them – they know it instinctively. Likewise, when they hit on something that is good for them – that provides value – they know that, too. If an institution needs to try hard to persuade people that what it offers is "good for them," it is already behind the curve. The problem is never communications alone, but substance.

The Strategic Concept

To its credit, NATO attempted to address this substance problem through the crafting of a new NATO Strategic Concept. The goal, quite simply, was to define NATO's role in the modern era, so that publics would see and understand how NATO helps them. This would, in turn, provide a basis for political commitment and resource contributions. And indeed, it is hard to question the substantive merit of the new Strategic Concept – it strikes a strong balance across the full range of issues: territorial defense versus expeditionary missions; traditional threats versus new challenges; military versus civil-military roles; and Article 5 defense versus new partnerships.

NATO thus has a strong claim to make in asserting that it has indeed addressed the questions of substance surrounding its role through the new Strategic Concept. While NATO may have seemed irrelevant in Europe and drifting off into new

missions in the far-abroad, the Strategic Concept grounds NATO in a coherent way of thinking about the potential threats and challenges confronting allied nations today.

In theory, therefore, the foundation has been laid on which to embark on a new communications mission to persuade people that the new NATO, with the new Strategic Concept, is now deserving of their support. And yet such an effort would immediately lack credibility. The public can still sniff out that something is wrong.

Leaders, Words, and Deeds

What is wrong is that while the Strategic Concept has provided the words, these words are contradicted by deeds. While the Strategic Concept says that NATO will take on new roles, allied nations continue to cut resources. While it talks about expeditionary crisis management, allied governments are looking for ways to hand over responsibility and begin to draw down from Afghanistan. Though it says we want to invest NATO with civil-military capabilities, several nations are intent on ensuring to the extent anyone receives such resources, it will be the European Union instead.

And it is this – the deeds rather than the words of the Strategic Concept – that allied publics see and feel. It is also what most allied leaders and governments reflect in their statements, decisions, and actions. Thus even to the extent that publics take their cues from their national leaders, they are getting the opposite message about NATO from that embodied in the Strategic Concept.

As former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson said a decade ago: "NATO's credibility is its capability." As NATO's capabilities are being reduced, its credibility is going down – and this makes any public relations campaign a nearly impossible task.

In a way, NATO has run into a simple tautological problem: lacking the public support to carry out its 21st century role, NATO has more assertively defined that role – and in doing so, NATO has increased its credibility problem because it lacks the capacities, leadership support, and public support for that ambitious role. In this context of weak credibility, framed by contradictory actions and a lack of active support even among the leaders of allied nations, a NATO-led communications effort to sell the 21st century vision of the Alliance would go nowhere.

Off-Topic

A related aspect of this problem is that most allied publics do not perceive any real threats to their security of the kind NATO is attempting to address – and do perceive other challenges that NATO does not address. Afghanistan is seen as a (painful) contribution to U.S. interests, not a direct self-interest. Cyberattacks are seen as amorphous, largely a national responsibility, and distant from perceptions about NATO. Energy security is a national and EU issue. In most allied countries, Russia is not seen as an immediate security threat.

And yet publics are deeply concerned about other issues, which NATO is not addressing (and probably never can address). These include effects of globalization, new rising powers such as China, the global economy, the Euro, unemployment, immigration, climate change, poverty, and disease, just to name a few. Allied publics are more concerned about these human security issues than they are about the seemingly more remote security issues that NATO is endeavoring to address.

Defining a Long-term Public Strategy

Against these challenges, NATO must do two things to begin a long-term effort at reshaping public attitudes: rebuild its credibility and demonstrate that NATO's activities address issues about which publics are genuinely concerned.

Capabilities and Success

To restore its own credibility, NATO needs to deliver visible success. Although one could point to less significant actions, NATO's last major success was arguably the Kosovo air campaign. Today, NATO's biggest operation, ISAF, is largely seen as failing. Moreover, the peripheral stories about NATO – budget cuts, caveats, civilian casualties, failing to meet forced generation goals and so forth – reinforce an image of a NATO that is weak and declining.

The most important contribution to NATO's PR efforts, therefore, will be to accomplish successfully what NATO says it will do. This means success in Afghanistan by leaving a viable end-state, not merely executing a withdrawal. And it means defining and meeting concrete goals for building the capabilities required by the Strategic Concept.

It will require financial resources, investment, Article 5 planning, new civil-military capabilities and so on. NATO must take on specific operations in these new areas and

accomplish them. NATO should be able to talk about how it succeeded in improving cyber security, energy security, preventing spillover from overseas crises, etc. Given the financial, political, and psychological state of the Alliance, the effort to set and achieve concrete goals must be modest: it is better to define a limited objective and achieve it than to define a massive goal and come up short.

Doing all these things – in the face of public skepticism and concern – requires NATO leaders to take hard decisions and exercise real leadership. ***Indeed, if there is one role that the SACEUR / EUCOM Commander can uniquely play, it is to engage with the leaders of allied nations directly to win their personal commitment to taking the tough decisions and giving the tough public messages necessary to allow NATO to succeed, and thus to restore its credibility.***

“This is My NATO”

Finally, NATO needs to define and tackle problems that publics are concerned about and can relate to. And these may differ from country to country. Article 5 reassurance and exercises may count in the Baltic states, but few other countries. Missile defense does not resonate at all. Cyber security – insofar as it is about NATO's own military communications systems, rather than societal vulnerabilities as a whole, likewise does not resonate.

Examples that do have potential to resonate more could include NATO's Mediterranean counter-terrorism mission; counter-piracy in the Indian Ocean; crisis response (especially in Africa and the Middle East); cooperation with Russia; and completion of democratic transitions and enlargement in the Balkans.

In addition, NATO has a strong historical record to stand on – from protecting Berlin to ending the Cold War to patrolling northern Norway. These can be used as national success stories in a public relations effort – linking NATO's past accomplishments to the lives of individuals in NATO nations today.

With reinvigorated leadership support, improving capabilities and successes to point to, and a careful mining of NATO's historical achievements nation-by-nation, NATO could then begin an outreach effort with some hope of improving public support. This would require a strong, personal commitment by leaders: Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, and Defense

Ministers must all be personally involved in taking the Alliance's message to their own publics.

Yet in delivering such a campaign, it is important that NATO also speak at a personal level. The best vehicle would be having ordinary citizens from each NATO country speaking – in their native languages, in local TV/Internet media – stating simply what NATO does for them. It could be a Greek talking about coastal security; an Italian talking about Mediterranean patrols; a Czech talking about the restoration of Czech freedom; a German talking about Berlin.

To this can be added the beneficiaries of NATO's operations: e.g., an Afghan woman and student; a Bosnian Muslim; a Kosovar; a rescued piracy hostage. The goal in all cases is to

personalize the results of NATO's activities so ordinary people can relate to it in their own national contexts.

Conclusion

In sum, NATO launching a public outreach campaign at this moment will achieve little to no effect. The first step is to get NATO's own house in order: restoring credibility by achieving success in its missions; ensuring that resources and political will match NATO's stated ambitions; and linking NATO's actions far more closely with the actual concerns of publics in allied countries. With that in hand, a human-level public outreach campaign has a greater chance of success.

The Atlantic Council's Board of Directors

CHAIRMAN

*Chuck Hagel

CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Brent Scowcroft

PRESIDENT AND CEO

*Frederick Kempe

CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

*Henry E. Catto

VICE CHAIRS

*Richard Edelman

*Brian C. McK. Henderson

*Richard L. Lawson

*Virginia A. Mulberger

*W. DeVier Pierson

TREASURERS

*Ronald M. Freeman

*John D. Macomber

SECRETARY

*Walter B. Slocombe

DIRECTORS

*Robert J. Abernethy

Timothy D. Adams

Carol C. Adelman

Herbert M. Allison, Jr.

Michael A. Almond

*Michael Ansari

Richard L. Armitage

*David D. Aufhauser

Ralph Bahna

Donald K. Bandler

Lisa B. Barry

Thomas L. Blair

Susan M. Blaustein

*Julia Chang Bloch

Dan W. Burns

R. Nicholas Burns

*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

Daniel W. Christman

Wesley K. Clark

John Craddock

Tom Craren

*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Thomas M. Culligan

Brian D. Dailey

*Paula Dobriansky

Markus Dohle

Lacey Neuhaus Dorn

Conrado Dornier

Eric S. Edelman

Thomas J. Edelman

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

Stuart E. Eizenstat

Dan-Åke Enstedt

Julie Finley

Lawrence P. Fisher, II

Barbara Hackman Franklin

*Chas W. Freeman

Jacques S. Gansler

*Robert Gelbard

Richard L. Gelfond

*Edmund P. Giambastiani, Jr.

*Sherri W. Goodman

John A. Gordon

*C. Boyden Gray

*Stephen J. Hadley

Mikael Hagström

Ian Hague

Harry Harding

Rita E. Hauser

Annette Heuser

Marten H.A. van Heuven

Mary L. Howell

Benjamin Huberman

Linda Hudson

*Robert E. Hunter

Robert L. Hutchings

Wolfgang Ischinger

Robert Jeffrey

*A. Elizabeth Jones

*James L. Jones, Jr.

George A. Joulwan

Francis J. Kelly

L. Kevin Kelly

Zalmay Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

James V. Kimsey

*Roger Kirk

Henry A. Kissinger

Franklin D. Kramer

Philip Lader

Muslim Lakhani

David Levy

Robert G. Liberatore

Henrik Liljegren

*Jan M. Lodal

Izzat Majeed

Wendy W. Makins

William E. Mayer

Barry R. McCaffrey

Mark McLaughlin

Eric D.K. Melby

Jack N. Merritt

Franklin C. Miller

*Judith A. Miller

Alexander V. Mirtchev

Obie Moore

*George E. Moose

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Philip A. Odeen

Ana Palacio

Torkel L. Patterson

William J. Perry

*Thomas R. Pickering

*Andrew Prozes

Arnold L. Punaro

Kirk A. Radke

Joseph W. Ralston

Norman W. Ray

Teresa M. Ressel

Joseph E. Robert, Jr.

Jeffrey A. Rosen

Charles O. Rossotti

Stanley Roth

Michael L. Ryan

Marjorie M. Scardino

William O. Schmieder

John P. Schmitz

Jill A. Schuker

Kiron K. Skinner

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Alan Spence

John M. Spratt, Jr.

Richard J.A. Steele

Philip Stephenson

*Paula Stern

John Studzinski

William H. Taft, IV

John S. Tanner

Peter J. Tanous

Paul Twomey

Henry G. Ulrich, III

Enzo Viscusi

Charles F. Wald

Jay Walker

Mark R. Warner

J. Robinson West

John C. Whitehead

David A. Wilson

Maciej Witucki

R. James Woolsey

Dov S. Zakheim

Anthony C. Zinni

HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

Madeleine K. Albright

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

Edward L. Rowny

James R. Schlesinger

George P. Shultz

John Warner

William H. Webster

LIFETIME DIRECTORS

Lucy Wilson Benson

Daniel J. Callahan, III

Kenneth W. Dam

Stanley Ebner

Carlton W. Fulford, Jr.

Geraldine S. Kunstadter

James P. McCarthy

Steven Muller

Stanley R. Resor

William Y. Smith

Helmut Sonnenfeldt

Ronald P. Verdicchio

Carl E. Vuono

Togo D. West, Jr.

** Members of the Executive Committee
List as of June 16, 2011*

The Atlantic Council of the United States is a non-partisan organization that promotes constructive U.S. leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

1101 15TH STREET, NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20005 (202) 463-7226

WWW.ACUS.ORG