# Public Diplomacy and Hard Power: The Challenges Facing NATO

Philip Seib

If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) vanished tomorrow, would anyone notice?

NATO is still with us, but is it valued by Americans and Europeans as it was during the Cold War? Does it really amount to anything more than an adjunct to the U.S. military? Just asking such questions is politically incorrect in some circles, but NATO's future is far from certain. Its leaders should be formulating answers to such queries.

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has seen its mission evolve from being a U.S. and Western European counterweight to the military might of the Soviet Union. In recent years, NATO has served as a strike force in Kosovo and Libya and has contributed to combat operations in Afghanistan. Adversaries have become more diverse; today, the enemy is no longer the Red Army but, rather, Somali pirate crews. Perhaps most importantly, NATO remains the primary military connection between Western Europe and the United States. It is a symbol of a stability that is part real, part illusion. Despite the Balkans war and tensions resulting from the breakup of

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the former Soviet bloc, the large-scale conflagration feared at the time of NATO's birth has not happened.

NATO has expanded to include twenty-eight members and possesses a huge bureaucracy indicative of an assumption that it is a permanent multinational institution. It derives strength from the aspirations of Eastern European states that see NATO membership as protection against a post-Soviet Russia that is still considered avaricious. In recent years, however, NATO has displayed vulnerability, and its neglect of public diplomacy has contributed to the organization's problematic trajectory.

At the heart of this problem is the lack of fairly apportioned burden-sharing in the organization's finances. In June 2011, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told NATO members that, during the Cold War, the United States had thought it worthwhile to contribute roughly 50 percent of NATO's military spending but that recently the U.S. share had risen to more than 75 percent. Gates said, "The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense." Gates pointed out that in the NATO intervention in Libya, every member state voted for the mission, but fewer than a third took part in the actual air strikes and fewer than half participated at all. Of this, Gates said, "Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there."[1]

The current Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, echoed Gates when he told NATO countries' defense ministers in June 2013 that "over-dependence on any one country for critical capabilities brings with it risks." Hagel also said that NATO "must address the gaps in military expenditures and capabilities of its partners. The tough decisions cannot continue to be deferred."[2]

A case can be made that it is only a matter of time before many of the non-American NATO members become so non-functional as financial and military contributors that NATO funding will become politically unsustainable in the United States. Without the United States, NATO, as it is now constituted, would implode.

Further diminishing U.S. interest in NATO is the increased American attention to regions other than Europe. James Goldgeier, Dean of American University's School of International Service, recently wrote that "the U.S. will seek to recast the transatlantic relationship as one in which Europe will

maintain the peace on its own continent and engage in small interventions in its broader neighborhood when its interests are at stake, while the U.S. rebalances its foreign policy to manage the challenges arising dramatically in the Asia-Pacific region."[3]

While the U.S. focus broadens, NATO cannot afford to cling to an evaporating status quo. The organization—mainly its non-American members—must more assertively and more creatively address NATO's future and, in doing so, reach a broader base, particularly the public's of the member countries whose taxes support NATO-related defense spending. Given the amount of information available to global publics through social media and other new venues, the notion that NATO's future can be determined by an elite few is obsolete. People know what is going on in the world and they want to be part of any process that affects their future. As a matter of basic politics, they resent being taken for granted. If the broadened base of support that Gates and Hagel have called for is to come into being, NATO will need greater country-by-country public support for essential spending. Public diplomacy in itself will not ensure NATO's continued relevance, but if NATO fails to do a better job of listening to and reaching out to its diverse constituencies, the chances for its demise will increase significantly.

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Screams of protest can be anticipated from Brussels in response to assertions of NATO deficiencies in public diplomacy. NATO would assert that it does regard public diplomacy seriously and has high-ranking officials, including an Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, who are responsible for its communications in this field. But NATO's public diplomacy efforts persistently stumble while trying to reconcile a fundamentally hard power role with a purported appreciation of soft power. The NATO website, for instance, while technologically up-to-date, often does not always link its content to NATO's duties. A recent video news story for natochannel.tv offered a thorough report about obstacles Afghan women may face when voting in their country's 2014 presidential election. But nowhere in the story was there a mention of NATO or of how NATO might help ensure women's security during the electoral cycle. NATO may be training the Afghan military and police whose job it will be to protect women's voting rights, but this point was not explicitly made.

This soft-sell may not be the most appropriate strategy. Beyond its combat role, NATO provides troops to assist relief efforts during humanitarian emergencies. This has been a great service on numerous occasions, but no one is going to confuse NATO with the Red Cross. The organization's public diplomacy is more likely to succeed if it were instead to focus on the realities of a world in which hard power is, for good or ill, still an essential element of geopolitics.

NATO should direct its public diplomacy toward two general audiences. First, it should target the broad public that includes Americans and make the case that the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of a need for European defense. Second, it should focus on the publics of NATO's non-U.S. member states and impress upon them that it is in their own interest to keep NATO intact and efficient by increasing defense spending and military capability.

Concerning the first of these tasks, I recently attended a Baltic defense conference in Estonia and soon realized, as one of the few Americans participating, that the physical distance between the United States and Russia can make Americans nonchalant about Russian power and intentions. We allow ourselves to be distracted by ploys such as Russian President Vladimir Putin's venting on *The New York Times* op-ed page while his near neighbors feel the persistent pressure of "soft coercion" applied by Russia. Still angry about NATO's expansion onto what was once Soviet-controlled turf, Russia is turning economic screws on countries such as Moldova and Ukraine to keep them from drifting farther westward. That kind of pressure has already compelled Armenia to turn away from its European neighbors and join Russia's customs union.[4]

Sometimes, Russia's tactics are not so soft. During spring and summer 2013, Russian military exercises in northern Europe included simulated air strikes and electronic warfare against Sweden and substantial troop movements near the Baltic states. NATO held its own exercises later in 2013, but they were considerably smaller in scale (and menace) than those conducted by Russia. There are even some joint NATO-Russia military drills, but they are limited to matters such as submarine rescue practice—useful but essentially token gestures.

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because in terms of pure military strength, there is lopsided dependence within the organization on the United States. NATO is a partnership, but not every partner can carry an equal amount of weight. Financial and operational responsibilities should subsequently be apportioned realistically, including duties reassigned in recognition that the U.S. role may decrease.

This proactive step is essential to maintain faith in NATO's ability to preserve peace. If the organization's newest members in the former Soviet satellite states feel neglected by the West and left to their own devices, the chances of a tragic mistake occurring amidst the back-and-forth of competing military exercises will increase. Even a minor error—such as one scared soldier pulling a trigger—could lead to a crisis. Were that to happen, the United States would be drawn in, even if just tangentially, and the already rickety U.S.-Russia relationship would become even flimsier. At the Estonia conference, no one saw a significant confrontation as likely, but Russia's military activity was viewed as troubling.

While Russia pursues its aggressive maneuvering, a strong but not provocative NATO presence can serve as a calming influence, and that works to the advantage of the United States, Europe, and the broader world. NATO has done a poor job of delivering this message to its member nations' publics, as is evidenced by some of those nations' diminished contributions. The second part of this proposed public diplomacy task for NATO is, thus, crucial. It must convince the citizens of its member countries to invest more in their own defense as it relates to their role in NATO. Within the organization, the agreed-upon benchmark for defense spending is 2 percent of the GDP, but as of 2012, according to NATO records, only four NATO members reached this spending threshold—the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Estonia.[5] Secretary Gates had warned in 2011 that NATO could be "turning into a two-tiered alliance … between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership—be they security guarantees or headquarters billets—but don't want to share the risks or costs." This, said Gates, "is no longer a hypothetical worry."[6]

As NATO's military operations in Afghanistan and Libya have illustrated, the organization's original mandate of protecting its mostly European members has changed. The U.S. military recognizes that Asia has become the locus of the most significant strategic challenges for the near future, and sub-Saharan Africa will also require more attention given the increased activity of al-Qaeda-related militant groups there. The United States sees Europe today more as a staging ground rather than a prospective battleground, and its security will be entrusted to a less U.S.-centric

NATO and the European Union, with America acting as NATO's guarantor of last resort.

NATO's mission today is broader than the conventional, border-based defense that for which it was originally conceived. Publics in the United States and Europe should be reminded that NATO can help defend against modern threats such as cyberattacks, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other dangers that require capabilities far removed from Cold War defense strategies. That is the new reality to which NATO must adjust as it makes the case for its continued relevance. The adjustment is more political than military and, as such, will require the kind of imaginative and thorough public diplomacy that NATO has yet to prove that it can master. By the time of the 2014 NATO summit, the organization should have a comprehensive plan to maintain and expand the broad-based public support it needs to ensure a healthy future. ***f***

**ENDNOTES**

1 Robert M. Gates, "The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)," speech delivered at Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011 <www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechID=1581> (accessed October 22, 2013).
2 Jorge Benitez, "Will the U.S. 'Rebalance' Its Contribution to NATO?" *Defense One,* October 20, 2013 <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/10/will-us-rebalance-its-contribution-nato/72281/?oref=d-interstitial-continue> (accessed October 21, 2013).
3 James Goldgeier, "Washington's Call to Arms," *The World Today,* October-November 2013, 25.
4 David M. Herszenhorn, "Russia Putting a Strong Arm on Neighbors," *The New York Times,* October 23, 2013.
5 Benitez.
6 Gates.