
Does NATO need rebranding?



New age technologies and Cold

War stereotypes abound as alliance looks to wins hearts and minds

Dr Stephanie Babst

Volume 3, issue 12 December 2009

We are living in an age of globalised communication where information has become more fragmented than ever. Every day millions of videos, images, news and personal comments are uploaded on websites, chat rooms and other social web applications, making it hard for the average citizen to find the exact information he or she is looking for. At the same time, these new real-time technologies have allowed us to be more than just information consumers. Thanks to digital cameras and mobile phones, photos and videos are spread within seconds across the globe, thus turning millions of people into information do-ers.

But the current communication environment also has a number of downsides. For national governments and international organisations it is much harder to get their messages across. The top-down communication patterns of the Cold War era are increasingly being replaced by people-to-people diplomacy and peer-to-peer relationships and networks. Not surprisingly, institutional communication channels rank among the least trusted.

Branding entire nations

A way out seems to be branding. Public diplomacy and place branding are widely seen as essential tools to win over hearts and minds of foreign audiences and convince them that a country's values, goals and desires are worth supporting. With a lot of governments hiring PR firms to improve their image abroad, the branding industry is said to have skyrocketed over the past ten years. Nobody doubts that countries depend on their image just as much as companies do. A positive national image can help in everything from attracting tourists to luring foreign investment and winning the approval of international public opinion. A negative or weak image, by contrast, can make everything seem like a uphill struggle.

Russia joins nations seeking to counter negative international impressions

The list of European, Asian or African countries having applied corporate communication techniques to bolster their public image is impressively long. In Europe, for example, Slovenia and Croatia are frequently cited success stories with regard to the use of branding campaigns to emphasise their definitive political and cultural break with ex-Yugoslavia following their respective secession from Belgrade. More recently, Russia has formed a commission to improve its image abroad which has suffered following Moscow's war against Georgia in August 2008, the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the lingering gas conflict with Ukraine and the political assassinations of prominent journalists and human rights activists.

Russia's rulers find themselves in good company. The United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Canada, New Zealand and most Western European countries are also clients of professional branding companies. Together with Egypt, Austria, Chile, China and many more countries, they are listed in the Anholt Nations Brands Index that Simon Anholt, first a pioneer and now an established 'guru' of the international branding business, established in 2005. Based on thousands of interviews conducted by Anholt and his partners every year in more than thirty countries, the index determines how countries are perceived by others in terms of their political, economic and cultural

attractiveness. So where does the Transatlantic Alliance fit in all this, in particular now that NATO has just celebrated its 60th anniversary?

NATO: well known but often misunderstood

The good news is that the Alliance still enjoys a recognisable brand. As international and national surveys show, NATO is widely associated with security and defence and perceived as a transatlantic provider of peace and security. That is certainly not bad for an organisation that has been around for 60 years. On the other hand, the Alliance is still struggling to overcome Cold War stereotypes and widespread suspicions that the United States wants to push the organisation into assuming the role of a global policeman.

But even before the end of the Cold War, European views on Washington's foreign policies and public support for NATO as an organisation were closely linked. After 11 September 2001, Europeans – both political elites and everyday citizens – were almost uniform in their dissatisfaction with former US President George W. Bush's policies. As a reflection of the Allies' disagreement over the US-led intervention in Iraq and the 'war on terrorism', public support for NATO sank quite considerably in many of the old Member countries between 2004 and 2007.

The Obama effect

But what a difference a new US President can make! European support for US President Barack Obama's handling of foreign policy is four times the approval rate given to his predecessor, George W. Bush. In 2008, only 19% of Europeans had a favourable view of George Bush's foreign policy; in 2009, 77% have a positive view of Obama. The picture remains somewhat mixed, however, as people in Central and Eastern European countries as well as in Turkey seem to be markedly less enthusiastic about Obama and the United States.

Consequently, NATO, the embodiment of the transatlantic security relationship, has re-gained public support in many Allied countries. It is still seen as essential by six out of ten respondents (58%) in the European Union and Turkey and by Americans (62%). In 2009, this figure is up, from recent lows, by 13 percentage points in Spain (to 61%), by 11 percentage points in the Netherlands (to 77%), and by 10 percentage points in the United Kingdom (to 72%). In Germany, support for the Alliance has increased from 55 (2007) to 64 percentage points; and in Slovakia from 44 (2007) to 52 percentage points.

Falling support for NATO's Afghanistan mission

Notwithstanding growing European and Turkish support for transatlantic security cooperation, the public in NATO nations and in the United States continue to disagree about some major issues such as Afghanistan. In 2009, three out of five respondents (62%) in the European Union and Turkey say they remain pessimistic about stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. At the same time, a majority of Americans (56%) are optimistic. Moreover, the prevailing view in many European nations is a desire to see the number of their troops reduced or their forces totally withdrawn. More than half of West Europeans (55%) and two-thirds of East Europeans (69%) want to reduce the number of troops or entirely withdraw their soldiers from Afghanistan.

The need to promote NATO success stories

Given the degree of public scepticism about NATO's role in Afghanistan, the Allies will certainly have to enhance their communication efforts to better explain what NATO has already achieved at the Hindu Kush and how it wants to proceed in the mid-term future.

Apart from this, moreover, NATO needs to tackle another fundamental challenge to its image. In particular, it needs to engage the young generation in Allied countries that have only foggy ideas of what exactly the Transatlantic Alliance is all about. National and international surveys demonstrate clearly that the post-Cold-War generation has only a faint idea of the Alliance's new missions and

policies, be it fighting piracy off the coast of Somalia or NATO's partnership projects and programmes.

Engaging the next generation

Not every citizen can be expected to become a security expert. But it is important that the next generation of leaders in Europe and North America understands, values and supports the spirit of the transatlantic security partnership. That is why NATO has embarked on a special effort to reach out to the successor generation, through facilitating networks among students and young political leaders, offering summer schools and fellowships and organising seminars and workshops across NATO nations. The Headquarters in Brussels has also commenced to make efficient use of new media applications, organising online discussions on NATO's new Strategic Concept and on Afghanistan. In this regard NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen can surely be called a frontrunner. He runs personal Facebook and Twitter profiles and since his arrival in Brussels in late summer, has been responding directly to questions and comments from ordinary citizens in his digital "Secretary General's corner".

NATO Allies have come to understand how important a modern and responsive public diplomacy strategy is for the organisation. They have grasped that NATO's image, for better or for worse, rests in their own hands. A strong and positive brand can never be constructed through communications, slogans and logos alone. It needs to be earned through convincing policies and political actions – and this is exactly what the 28 Allies are trying to achieve together on a daily basis.

Dr Stephanie Babst is NATO's Assistant Deputy Secretary General for Public Diplomacy