

## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY – THE ART OF ENGAGING AND INFLUENCING**

### **Speech by Dr. Stefanie Babst, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Strategy at the NATO PfP Symposium on 22 January 2009**

Let me start by saying how much I appreciate the opportunity today to talk to you about public diplomacy. It is an important topic. But as it is true for many important themes, it is not always easy to get to the core of the issue, especially when the one at stake is complex and multifaceted.

This applies very much to public diplomacy, too. Is public diplomacy an expression of soft or smart power as Joseph Nye suggests? Is it primarily about winning hearts and minds and if so, how can we attain this aim? Is it not simply a modern form of propaganda or a political sibling of public relations? Or, as others suggest, is public diplomacy an outdated model that needs to be replaced by the sexier label of strategic communications? Admittedly, a lot of questions – difficult questions.

For the past ten years I have been working within the field of Public Diplomacy. This came about not so much by choice as by coincidence. I joined NATO's International Staff as a political scientist with a special focus on Russia. To someone who – like many academics – felt a particular sense of happiness in analyzing and criticizing foreign policy issues from a safe position “outside of the box”, working for the transatlantic Alliance from the inside seemed a fitting challenge.

In the course of the past years I have learned many interesting things about the box called NATO, mostly about the day-to-day difficulties of multilateral politics. It is not easy to facilitate consensus among 26 different stakeholders. While they all share a strong belief in the same business, they sometimes differ enormously on how to advance the organization's interests and policies.

One of the key lessons learned, however, concerns the importance of communication. Clearly it is key for the Allies to communicate with each other in order to generate decision-making, but it is equally important for NATO to communicate with the rest of the world: with the public in our home countries, our partners, other international organizations, and what is often called “the global audience”.

The principle behind this seems quite simple. In order to advance your goals and bring about change, you need to engage, listen, discuss, persuade and ultimately influence others. This is something we all experience in our daily lives.

But to do this as an actor in the international system is much more difficult. And this takes us right to the heart of public diplomacy.

So let me start with my first point, which probably comes as a surprise to some of you.

**The art of public diplomacy is not new.** That is to say that although the term may be new to some, the activity itself is old. History offers some great examples to illustrate this: The Roman Republic invited the sons of neighbouring kings to be educated in Rome; the great library in Alexandria, constructed by the Greeks, offered special training programmes for scholars from across the ancient world; Napoleon, when he invaded Egypt, planned to order the entire French army to convert to Islam to help establish the French rule, and Churchill successfully presented the largest empire the world had ever known as a lucky underdog to win over US hearts and minds.

A more recent example of successful public diplomacy is probably the German-French reconciliation after the Second World War – a process in which local town-to-town exchanges preceded the youth exchange programmes enshrined in the Elysee Treaty (1963). The public diplomacy efforts of Paris and Berlin changed the perceptions and images of thousands of young Germans and Frenchmen, building an increasingly strong fundament for the special Franco-German relationship and the process of European integration.

So while it is correct to say that the **core practice of public diplomacy** has its roots in the statecraft of Europe and Asia, it is equally fair to say that America is home to contemporary public diplomacy. It was former US Ambassador to Korea Edmund Gullion who reinvented the concept when he was appointed Dean of the Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University (1964). Consecutive US Administrations from the mid-sixties through the early nineties followed his concept, creating and sponsoring an impressive array of public diplomacy programmes: international exchange and visiting programmes for young political leaders from Europe, the Middle East and Africa; fellowship programmes for students and academics (Fulbright); and radio and TV stations such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. These are perhaps the most prominent examples of this enormous outreach effort.

Washington invested billions of dollars into these programmes with the sole aim to strengthen America's image abroad and advance its national interests across the globe. No other country has demonstrated a similar belief in the power of public diplomacy and applied the concept in such a systematic and sophisticated manner.

But these days are gone. They are gone because the Administration of President Bush junior downsized these public diplomacy programmes considerably. They are also gone because the policies of President Bush caused significant damage to America's image abroad. But primarily, they are gone because our world has changed so dramatically since the end of the Cold War.

This, in turn, brings me to my second point. Today we need a **public diplomacy that fits our time** – one that goes beyond improving a nation's brand. The policy issues which confront us are increasingly global. Terrorism, climate change, poverty, insecurity and conflict represent only some of the most pressing international challenges. More than ever, governments, organizations and other players in the international arena need to work together to address them, in order to find support for solutions and change. No single government or agency can tackle this expanding number of problems on its own. Solutions cannot simply be plucked off the shelf and implemented. They must be created together by coalitions within and between governments, and between governments and a panoply of non-governmental groups.

By definition, then, if governments are to deal effectively with the key foreign policy challenges of our age, they must engage in a new form of public diplomacy: one that combines the understanding of a given challenge, in both a factual and a narrative sense, with the ability to mobilize networks and public support to bring about concrete change.

But there is another reason why a new form of public diplomacy is much needed. The proliferation of new international actors, including NGOs and corporations, and the arrival of global digital and real-time technologies have blurred the lines between domestic and international news spheres. Today's audiences are no longer simply passive news recipients. The top-down communication patterns of the Cold War era are increasingly being replaced by people-to-people and peer-to-peer relationships and networks. Just look at some of the recent NGO campaigns on climate change, HIV or poverty in Africa. They are impressive examples of how new information technologies

can be used successfully to mobilise millions of people across the globe, and how powerful their demand for change can become.

Globalization affects the way we communicate with each other, and presents a challenge for every political leadership. Indeed some governments find it difficult to accept that “shouting out” core messages, ever louder, in the false belief that they will eventually be heard, is no longer a recipe for mobilizing and sustaining public and political support. Instead, if they want to succeed, today’s politicians need to find out what motivates people and seek to identify possible common interests. They need to understand radicalized youth, the concerns of energy consumers and those of rainforest loggers. Before they can expect public support for military operations abroad, they must present compelling arguments as well as facts. They need to involve networks and groups in their own thinking and policy planning. They need to persuade and influence. That is a lot to ask – perhaps, as some might argue, too much to ask. But ultimately this is exactly what is needed if governments want to deal effectively with the challenges we are facing.

Obviously, there are different public diplomacy strategies and what worked brilliantly in one case may not be the best approach in another. One strategy may focus on initiating, feeding and broadening a discussion (engagement strategy); another may serve the sole purpose of steering towards a consensus in order to bring about change (shaping strategy). A public diplomacy strategy may also be used to confront an existing consensus and change the current course of action (disruptive strategy); or, as our military tries to do in confronting the Taliban in Afghanistan, it could aim to destroy an adversary’s propaganda.

At the end of the day, every public diplomacy strategy must pursue a particular political objective that needs to be clearly identified in advance.

So let us have a closer look at some of the key principles that should govern our thinking on a new public diplomacy approach.

**1. Public diplomacy is about listening.** Contrary to what some may think, successful public diplomacy does not begin with talking, but with listening. Listening is important for two reasons: firstly, collecting and analyzing the opinions of your respective target groups or segments of the public is a MUST. Unfortunately, not many governments and organizations systematically invest in surveying public trends. If at all, they often prefer

to rely on snapshots offering little in-depth knowledge of the sort that could help them understand their target groups and shape their public diplomacy approach accordingly.

Secondly, however, the listening must be genuine. It must be a serious effort to understand the motives and beliefs of your interlocutors. The famous listening tour of Karen Hughes in the Middle East (2005), for example, was not really crowned with success. For sure, she travelled the Arab world with good intentions, but used her trip more to preach the US way of life to a Muslim audience than to hear their views. Such “listening” is bound to fail.

**2. Public diplomacy must be connected to policy.** There is no substitute for a sound policy. What counts is not what you say, but what you do. That is why public diplomacy cannot and should not attempt to portray a serious crisis or war in rosy colours. You can never communicate a problem away. You may try, but experience tells us that most attempts are bound to fail. NATO’s operation in Afghanistan is a case in point. In 2004, former US President Bush announced that the *‘free world has achieved its first victory in the war on terror’*; standing besides President Karzai, he hailed the US coalition forces’ success in destroying the Taliban. But only a year later, in 2005, there was a sudden outbreak of suicide bombings that made clear to everybody that the road to a peaceful and secure Afghanistan would be long and bumpy. Although Mr. Bush’s declaration of *‘mission accomplished’* was clearly premature (as was the one in Iraq), it remained Washington’s core message until very recently.

Quite a few European governments did not fare much better, however. Indeed they were more cautious in declaring victory, but introduced the operation in Afghanistan to the public as primarily a humanitarian and reconstruction mission, thus as something that was morally right, noble and rather harmless for the troops on the ground. Well, reality shows that while some progress has been made in Afghanistan, at least parts of the country are still war zones where hundreds of soldiers and humanitarian workers have already lost their lives.

What does this tell us about an effective public diplomacy effort? In the first place, it tells us how imperative it is to be clear about your political goal. Often it is better for a government to admit that it is still trying to find the best solution, and that making progress takes time. Secondly, it tells us that communication efforts – no matter how

skilfully designed – are likely to fail if you insist on portraying something as a success story if it is not – as in the case of Afghanistan.

**3. Public diplomacy must be credible to be effective.** What applies to dealings with the media should apply to all public partners: if you try to manipulate or lie, you will immediately lose credibility. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of how much damage a dishonest public diplomacy effort can do to a government or even an entire country. In times of crisis or war it may seem particularly tempting to turn the truth upside down or at least twist it as much as possible. But despite the overflow of information in today's round-the-clock media environment, the public's memory still works and deception and lies are not easily forgiven.

The Chinese campaign for the Olympic Games provides a good example that even a public diplomacy firework – in the true sense of the word – can only achieve a short-lived victory. Admittedly, the Chinese managed their communication efforts quite cleverly and at least for some days, there was more direct reporting in the global media about happy sportsmen and -women than about human-rights abuses and the situation in Tibet. But the positive image that China seemed to have gained during the Olympics lasted only a brief moment – simply because her charm offensive was never sincere and credible. Credibility cannot be won overnight. It requires personal commitment and sustained efforts.

To me, the best-known example of a credible spokesman was my colleague Jamie Shea during the days of NATO's Kosovo campaign. He spent hours and hours with the journalists, always open, friendly and approachable, sharing with them his rich knowledge about international politics. They trusted him and did not look at him as a hostile figure but rather as a professional and reliable partner. That is as good as you can possibly get as a Spokesman!

**4. Public Diplomacy is not always about you.** Sometimes the most effective public diplomacy will be conducted under the media spotlights, but at other times, policy issues are better communicated by third parties, such as think tanks and academics, than through official statements. Facilitating and supporting discussions among political networks or groups of foreign policy professionals can be an excellent public diplomacy strategy if the aim is to introduce and bring to the public attention a specific policy issue.

NATO, for instance, puts a lot of efforts into cultivating networks and supporting discussions among security and foreign policy experts. The challenge, however, is to facilitate a debate that remains focused on a particular issue. Thus, for instance, working with the organizers of a Wilton Park conference on a series of dedicated discussions makes more sense than supporting a wide array of low-profile events that will never attract sufficient political attention. So you need to choose your public diplomacy partners carefully, and remain focused on the subject at hand.

**5. Public Diplomacy needs to respond to the challenges of the 2.0 web world.** To be effective, public diplomacy should make use of the entire communication toolbox, ranging from face-to-face discussions through to participating in the new online social networks. However, many governments and international organizations are only beginning to grasp how to make good use of new media technologies. It may be an encouraging sign that even Pope Benedict XIV has now launched his dedicated site on YouTube, but the worldwide web is not simply a news multiplier; it also presents a number of risks. Offering information about your policies and audiovisuals of all sorts online is certainly a useful thing to do, in particular because the number of online consumers has risen exponentially in the western world. In the less developed world, however, radio, print media and TV outlets still dominate the information environment. Simply posting a video on YouTube does not do the trick, either. Your news or footage can easily be used and manipulated by others. You need to continue engaging with online chatters and carefully select your target and digital means. If used smartly, however, the new media technologies can do a lot to support your public diplomacy operations.

**6. Public diplomacy requires proper planning, training and resources.** For far too long, public diplomacy was not seen as a core business, and public diplomacy experts had to sit at the end of the production line, far from the centre where policy is made and implemented. That needs to change. Public diplomacy needs to be part of the take-off, not the crash landing (Ed Murrow), but this idea is only slowly gaining currency. Too often, governments still focus their activities on managing the 24-hour media cycle, hoping to achieve a quick impact on their local constituency. This approach is certainly not sufficient to garner and sustain public support for a specific policy or change of action, however. Instead, public diplomacy must become an integral part of national policy planning and, ultimately, decision-making.

Understanding public diplomacy as a serious political instrument also means providing the necessary financial resources. As designing and executing a public diplomacy campaign does not come for free, governments need to mobilize the necessary funds to get public diplomacy rolling.

And finally, governments should invest in creating and training a cadre of public diplomats. Again, let me take the Alliance as an example.

NATO's senior military leadership has rightly put pressure on Allies to provide more and better trained military personnel able to deal professionally with the media and the broader communication aspects of NATO's operations and missions. At present, only a handful of nations have the capability to train their military staff to a higher standard. The lack of Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), related support staff and communication capabilities in theatre does not only hamper NATO's operational performance, though, expertise training is much needed on the civilian side, too.

Be it among NATO's International Staff or in NATO capitals, only a few individuals have ever received public diplomacy training of some sort, including in very basic competencies such as public speaking skills, media handling or the use of new information technologies – and yet they are expected to speak and interact convincingly in a highly pluralistic information environment. The time may now be ripe to create a NATO Training Centre (or Centre of Excellence) where Allied as well as NATO staff, both military and civilian, can study the dynamics of today's information networks, strategic planning, the application of new techniques and the wider approaches to public diplomacy. Ultimately, it does not matter where such training takes place. What matters is that NATO Allies comprehend that public diplomacy-related skills require adequate education and training.

So where does the Transatlantic Alliance stand in all this, in particular now that NATO is getting ready to celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

Some of our stakeholders have worries about the recent trend in some countries of declining public support for the Alliance; others are more specifically concerned about public scepticism towards NATO's difficult operation in Afghanistan – and rightly so.

Yet, public support for NATO still lies above 50 per cent in Allied nations overall, and in some countries it even reaches 70-80 per cent. That is certainly not bad for an organization that has been around for 60 years. More importantly, the Alliance still

enjoys a recognizable brand: it is widely associated with security and defence and recognized as a transatlantic provider of peace. Thus, while larger parts of our public, and in particular the younger generation, have only foggy ideas about NATO's transformation process, there still exists a considerable degree of trust and confidence in the organization's ability to protect and safeguard our freedom against new threats. Moreover, despite European opposition to the policies of former US President Bush, public support for Europe and North America to address threats and challenges jointly wherever possible has proved equally strong, even under the Bush Administration.

All these factors constitute a sound basis for making the Alliance even better understood by our public and involving it in the shaping of its future strategic direction.

To this end, an intelligent public diplomacy effort is needed. NATO has come quite a long way in embracing a new and modern understanding of its communication policies. This is not to say that we have already succeeded. In fact, NATO has merely started to transform its public diplomacy approaches and tools and has certainly left the 'stone age' behind. Yet, it still has some way to go.

On the positive side, we have made progress on a number of core issues: we have enhanced our listening skills and improved our efforts to better understand existing public perceptions and stereotypes. We are regularly analyzing current trends and motives, and in the autumn of last year we conducted a first NATO-owned focus study on one of our most important target groups, the post Cold War-born generation.

Together with our political stakeholders we have crafted dedicated public diplomacy strategies for particular regions and partner countries like Ukraine, Russia, the Balkans, and the MD (Mediterranean Dialogue) and ICI (Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) countries. We have become better at identifying the best communication approach to support key events such as Summits and NATO's current jubilee. And we are trying hard to engage our special target groups such as, for example, the successor generation, women, and decisions-makers.

Further, we have widened and modernized our communication toolbox and started to apply branding and image-building techniques. We have experimented with cultural branding, for instance by co-sponsoring sport events and arts exhibitions, with the aim of bringing NATO's core messages closer to ordinary people. We have reinforced our

ties to political networks and NGOs, and interact closely with national decision-makers and opinion formers in our countries.

We have overhauled our technological capabilities, aimed at bringing the NATO website and other audiovisual tools and products up to a par. We are trying hard to make NATO's interface with the outside world as interactive as possible, by hosting lectures, videos and discussions online. Since April last year, a TV channel has been complementing our digital information offer on the internet.

This is all good – but not good enough.

Let me point to three areas in which I think we can and should do better.

Firstly, we need to bring NATO's new public diplomacy philosophy closer to our stakeholders, encouraging them to develop a shared understanding and to invest more into their national communication efforts and capabilities. All in all, the Allies will have to become more interoperable, not just in military but also in public diplomacy terms. A joint vision of modern public diplomacy strategies and approaches could also help improve the Allies' ability to speak with one voice. This, admittedly, is one of our weaknesses, but one that is also an expression of NATO being a club of democracies. Moreover, a joint understanding of how NATO's new public diplomacy should operate must also be embraced by our military leadership. This could help counter the impression that NATO's civilian and military leadership does not move in tandem.

Secondly, our public diplomacy programmes need to become more focused and sustainable; indeed, many of our current activities are both creative and innovative but are spread too thin to have a sustainable effect. This, in turn, would require that Allies agree to say good-bye to some traditional, rather old-fashioned activities. It would also require more priority-setting. At the moment, almost each and every activity of the Alliance is regarded as a priority – both politically and in terms of communications. But public diplomacy – as said earlier – cannot succeed if your goal remains unclear, or if you try to pursue too many objectives at the same time.

And finally, NATO should be more courageous in using digital tools to directly interact with the public. Why not host a permanent blog on the NATO website? Why not participate in already existing on-line chats, for example, with Al-Jazeera or BBC Arabic? Why not widen the debate about NATO's new Strategic Concept beyond the

'usual suspects' and try to obtain new thinking through, for instance, online discussions with citizens on specific aspects of NATO's future role? And furthermore, is it really unthinkable for NATO to support other global campaigns, for instance on climate change or those led by the UN?

As you can see, there is still scope for improvement. NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a great opportunity to make the Alliance fitter for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and develop a renewed public narrative of the transatlantic security community, including the many facets of NATO's commitment to preserving peace and stability. Let us hope that when Allies discuss NATO's future strategic course at the forthcoming Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl, they will also take a moment to sign up to a 21<sup>st</sup> century public diplomacy approach.