

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

NATO Grapples with Soft Power ^[1]

BRUSSELS --- Since its founding in 1949, NATO has been a bastion of hard power, first as an alliance arrayed against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, and more recently as a manifestation of Western muscle in conflicts such as Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011. Coming off its decisive performance in helping to end the rule of Muammar Qaddafi, NATO seems to be happily basking in macho glory.

NATO has a public diplomacy department staffed with smart and dedicated people, but it became apparent at a conference on “The Power of Soft Power,” held recently in Brussels, that this contingent is increasingly lonely. As NATO prepares for its summit conference in Chicago in May, the organization needs to do much more to address the strategic realities of soft power in the digital communication era. This involves NATO assembling the tools to allow it to convince as well as coerce.

NATO recognizes the need to keep pace with changes in communications. Its media activity includes a TV channel, presence on Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook, and a video blog for its secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. But aside from its public diplomacy specialists, NATO does not fully grasp the ramifications of the technology-enabled networks that connect so many people, as could be seen during the Arab Awakening that began last year. If NATO’s use of hard power is to be seen as justified, it must make its case through soft power.

Like many governments, NATO is slow to recognize the empowerment accompanying the public’s unprecedented access to information. Acquiring knowledge about events near and far is no longer seen as a luxury but rather a right, and the interactive connectivity of social media extend the significance of this change. If NATO and other international organizations are to fulfill their missions and retain their legitimacy, they must respect this altered balance of information-based influence.

It is understandably difficult for a hard power organization such as NATO to adapt to the demands of a world in which soft power is becoming more important, but NATO’s future depends on its ability to adapt. Through soft power it must lay the foundation for an answer to the question, “If NATO were to disappear overnight, would the world be changed?” That question may have been unthinkable during the Cold War, but among some it has resonance today.

NATO is like the Tyrannosaurus Rex – a fearsome fighter wielding unmatched hard power. Of course, for the Tyrannosaurus hard power was not enough. It became extinct. NATO is still with us...for now.
