

**Thumbnail Image:**





# NATO's Public Diplomacy in the Grey Zone of Conflict <sup>[1]</sup>

NATO, the world's most powerful military alliance, has recently released a strategy to counter hybrid threats. This strategy recognizes the fact that the security environment is neither dominated by conventional threats, represented by rival states, or irregular threats, like the ones faced in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The challenge with hybrid warfare is that the actors are often diverse, as was the case with Russia's "little green men" supporting the rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, the tactics range from unconventional to conventional. In other words, challengers use a mix of cyberwarfare, information operations, and propaganda to have a deep societal impact, yet rely on standoff capabilities like man-portable air-defense systems (or MANPADS) and long-range rockets to achieve kinetic effects on the ground.

NATO allies, Western democratic governments with large foreign and defense bureaucracies, are developing responses to hybrid threats, so they can operate more nimbly in this grey zone of conflict. It is called the grey zone because it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the nature of such conflicts, and its perpetrators thrive on the plausible deniability of their actions. Indeed, it is often difficult to attribute hostile acts to one specific actor.

---

***To prevail in the grey zone, NATO must reach deep into societies where subversive elements may prove influential.***

The hybrid way of war has been well calibrated to integrate both soft and hard power tools in a way to achieve decisive political outcomes. The annexation of Crimea is a case in point. How can NATO adapt in this environment? The Alliance strategy must be able to deter hybrid threats through increased military readiness, especially in the Baltic countries. However, NATO must also envisage an overhaul of its public diplomacy toolkit. To prevail in the grey zone, NATO must reach deep into societies where subversive elements may prove influential. It is very different from the public diplomacy efforts that were deployed in support of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) operations in Afghanistan, to win the hearts and minds of the local population, to strengthen the confidence of communities with regards to the prolonged presence of NATO and partner countries. In the case of hybrid adversaries, the use of information warfare, cyber, and propaganda is much more widespread, sustained, and technologically sophisticated. NATO's rigid structure is therefore an impediment to engaging rapidly and effectively in this battlefield of ideas. Several public diplomacy strategies could be deployed for immediate effect:

1. The first recommendation is to conduct research and establish contacts with organized groups that belong to Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This is a segment of the population that Russia may try to claim as sympathizers. Putin may

even try to frame a military confrontation short of war in the region as an attempt to protect vulnerable Russian-speaking populations, the way it did in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Pre-empting Russian propaganda through sustained and targeted public diplomacy projects could therefore deny Moscow this opportunity.

2. Relatedly, the upcoming Summit in Warsaw, in July 2016, presents a unique opportunity for NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to reach beyond the rather limited audience of Summit attendees and NATO enthusiasts, who will follow the deliberations from a distance. NATO, using multiple social media platforms can make the Summit discussions more accessible than ever before. NATO cannot assume, as it has often done in the past, that audiences will come to them by visiting their website. NATO could also reach more varied constituencies by inviting civil society groups, especially from the Baltic states, that can relay some of NATO's core messages to audiences back home.
3. NATO's messages must resonate with populations in its most territorially-vulnerable member states and, if possible, reach the Russian people. Beyond reinforcing its deterrence posture and pledging assurance measures to its allies, NATO can deliver a clear and compelling message about its identity and values. NATO has become a culturally diverse organization and this diversity should be celebrated and integrated into the Summit's narrative. Given the dramatic political upheavals witnessed in Europe in 2015 and 2016, from the refugee crisis to the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, a message of tolerance, inclusiveness and solidarity must be conveyed. NATO must appeal to the values that unite its members and praise its multiculturalism to pre-empt Russia's "divide-and-conquer" tactics deployed through information operations.
4. Finally, while NATO will certainly project a firmer deterrence posture, as indicated by its plans to build a forward presence to the East, an attempt must still be made to leave the door open for face-saving diplomatic re-engagement with Russia. Moscow has unambiguously expressed grievances about NATO's continued expansion and missile defense plans, both of which are seen as undermining Russian security. Soon to be an alliance of 29 member states (with the accession of Montenegro), NATO could be more transparent about its future expansion plans. NATO can continue to build partnerships and foster greater security cooperation globally, but addressing concerns over expansion appears paramount if Russia and NATO are ever to reconcile. The narrative of reconciliation should be part of public diplomacy efforts to change the suspicious mindsets of international observers in both camps.

In the grey zone, it is better to count Russia as a partner than a rival. Addressing the causes of Russian grievances is the responsible thing to do and will pave the way for more stable order in Eastern Europe, in addition to providing reassurances to states in the Baltics and Central Europe. As President Obama conceded recently in the now famous *Atlantic* article of March 2016, "The fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do." It's time to start thinking about what comes after and how Moscow can move away from the grey zone and back into the NATO-Russia Council. Public diplomacy has a role to play in this endeavor.

Photo by U.S. Army Europe | CC 2.0

---