From Narrative Hegemony to the Audience Dilemma:

Structural Transformations in NATO's Public Diplomacy

by Tom Kühnel

In times of geopolitical transition, institutions anchored in the postwar liberal order face mounting pressure to justify their continued relevance—not only to adversaries, but increasingly to their own publics. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as both a political and military alliance, is at the heart of this dilemma. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered not only a strategic shift within NATO, but also a rhetorical shift. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept reinvoked the language of collective defense, systemic rivalry "strategic competition," and deterrence—echoes of Cold War thinking re-emerging in a fragmented international order.[1] Yet this return to strategic clarity on paper masks a deeper problem: the Alliance's ability to generate public legitimacy and understanding is eroding, both among its own people and among states in the Global South. NATO's public diplomacy must therefore be analyzed not only as a vehicle for external communication, but as a contested field of legitimization within fractured public spheres.

Historically, public diplomacy has served NATO both as a means of projecting unity in times of strategic threat and as a soft power tool to reinforce legitimacy within member states. During the Cold War, the threat was visible and the publics mostly aligned with NATO's mission. After 1991, messaging shifted toward liberal peacekeeping and democracy promotion, and by the early 2000s it was reframed again to justify interventions under the banner of the "War on Terror." Each phase reflected broader strategic transformations and recalibrations of NATO's purpose.

Today this model is faltering, moral clarity is contested, internal political will is fragmented, and external threats are increasingly hybrid and diffuse. The line between war and peace is becoming blurry. As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte observed, "We are not at war, but are certainly not at peace either."[2]

This article argues that NATO's public diplomacy has entered a new era, distinct from previous

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phases. The Alliance no longer operates from a hegemonic center and its normative authority is questioned by adversaries and the public alike. Public diplomacy is no longer about explaining missions or defending budgets but about bridging diverging perceptions between NATO's strategic imperatives and societies shaped by decades of peace and prosperity. This gap is structural: legitimacy is filtered through critical discourses that highlight hypocrisy, historical amnesia, and double standards. NATO's adversaries exploit these vulnerabilities through "negative soft power,"[3] while publics in democratic societies, where institutional trust has eroded, are increasingly receptive to such narratives.[4]

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In this fragmented environment, NATO faces the paradox of needing broader public support for deterrence and readiness while possessing fewer narrative tools to mobilize it. Traditional reliance on "shared values" is insufficient unless critically examined against how they are enacted in practice. To address this challenge, this paper reconstructs NATO's four eras of public diplomacy, analyzes the current gap between geopolitical reality and public perception, and outlines avenues for future research. The aim is not to defend NATO policy, but to understand how public diplomacy functions when moral narratives, strategic imperatives, and public expectations no longer align.

Eras of NATO's Public Diplomacy

The Cold War Era (1949–1991)

The origins of NATO's public diplomacy are inseparable from the early Cold War. In an era of ideological polarization, NATO's role was less to explain policy than to affirm a shared identity: a transatlantic democratic community under existential threat. Public diplomacy served two purposes—reassuring domestic publics about deterrence and presenting the Alliance as morally superior to the Eastern Bloc.

The 1949 Strategic Concept emphasized political and economic stability and the "moral strength of the peoples of the North Atlantic area" as essential for defense.[5] By 1952, this logic was reinforced with explicit reference to ideological confrontation, underscoring that cohesion and public support were vital elements of deterrence.[6] In practice, this meant centralized messaging, speaker programs, and controlled media campaigns aimed at legitimizing containment.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, NATO institutionalized these efforts through the NATO Information Service and the move to Brussels, transforming Public Diplomacy into a structured field. Psychological defense— winning "hearts and minds"—became central as the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity.[7] Throughout the Cold War, NATO's Public Diplomacy operated within a unipolar narrative: the enemy was clear, the goal was survival, and communication relied on binary contrasts of freedom versus oppression, democracy versus totalitarianism. While enthusiasm varied, publics largely accepted NATO's mission because the threat was tangible. Legitimacy rested not only on defense commitments, but on NATO's role as the embodiment of a liberal-democratic order resisting authoritarianism. This coherence of threat, identity, and narrative gave public diplomacy a clarity it would not fully recover in later eras.

The Peacekeeping Era (1991–2001)

The collapse of the Soviet Union forced NATO to reorient both its strategy and its public diplomacy. Without a singular existential threat,

the Alliance redefined itself as a stabilizing force in a wider security environment. The 1991 Strategic Concept emphasized crisis management, conflict prevention, and arms control, and extended NATO's communicative ambition: Promoting a "zone of stability and well-being" across Europe through partnership and outreach.[8]

Public diplomacy shifted from reassurance to persuasion, presenting NATO not only as a defense alliance, but as a liberal peace project. This narrative found expression in the Balkans, where interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were framed as humanitarian actions to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing. However, civilian casualties and contested legal justifications revealed the fragility of this approach. Externally, initiatives like Partnership for Peace aimed to prepare Eastern European publics for integration. Internally, NATO increasingly relied on values-based language to convince skeptical Western audiences. This dual-track strategy innovated but also exposed vulnerabilities, as legitimacy now depended less on defense and more on normative identity.[9]

Critics highlighted the selectivity of interventions and warned of mission creep. Questions such as "Why Kosovo and not Rwanda?" underscored the limits of NATO's moral framing. In the absence of a clear enemy, public diplomacy became contested and revealed early signs of normative overstretch.[10] Ultimately, the Peacekeeping Era successfully rebranded NATO for a post-Cold War world but at the cost of long-term credibility. By aligning its communication too closely with idealistic projections, the Alliance laid the groundwork for future crises of legitimacy that would emerge in the conflicts to come.

The War on Terror Era (2001–2021)

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a turning point for NATO. For the first time, Article 5 was invoked, but the adversary was not a state—it was al-Qaeda, a diffuse transnational network. NATO's mission thus shifted from defending borders to defending values and public diplomacy became central to justifying this transformation. NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept had already introduced the notion of "out-of-area" missions, but after 2001, this became the operational norm.[11]

Messaging leaned heavily on freedom, democracy, human rights, and the responsibility to protect. The intervention in Afghanistan was framed as both defensive and transformative, a campaign of liberation and nation-building.[12] Early public support was strong, with Afghanistan portrayed as the moral extension of Kosovo. As the war dragged on, NATO's rhetoric diverged from realities on the ground. Corruption, mission creep, casualties, and public fatigue eroded legitimacy. The Iraq War, launched outside NATO's framework, deepened disunity and damaged trust. Public diplomacy shifted from strategic identity-building to reactive damage control.

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This was no longer an era of narrative cohesion—it became an era of narrative struggle. Publics were no longer aligned behind a singular vision of liberal internationalism. The younger generation, in particular, began to question the coherence between the West's stated ideals and its actions. Why promote democracy abroad while

tolerating autocratic allies? Why speak of human rights while supporting drone strikes? NATO's reliance on normative rhetoric left it vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and overreach, and its public diplomacy was increasingly reactive, not strategic—more focused on damage control than identity construction.[13]

From the perspective of this paper's core argument, the War on Terror Era represents the culmination—and beginning of the end—of the "internal normative legitimacy" model. Like the 1990s, this was a phase where NATO did not derive legitimacy from a clear adversary, but from its own interpretation of values. However, unlike in the Peacekeeping Era, these values were now challenged from within. The more NATO justified itself through ideals, the more vulnerable it became to critiques of hypocrisy, overreach, and failure.

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This stands in stark contrast to the Cold War period, where legitimacy was rooted in the response to a clearly identifiable external threat. During the Cold War, NATO's legitimacy was anchored in countering a tangible external threat—the Soviet Union. This clear adversary fostered internal cohesion and a unified strategic direction among member states. In contrast, the War on Terror era saw NATO pivot towards promoting internal values such as democracy and human rights as the foundation for its missions. However, these values are inherently more subjective and open to interpretation than a concrete external enemy. This subjectivity led to internal debates and public scrutiny, as member nations and their populations grappled with differing perspectives on the definition and implementation of these values. Consequently,

NATO faced challenges in maintaining internal unity and articulating a coherent strategic vision, highlighting the complexities of deriving legitimacy from internal ideologies rather than external threats.

The Ukraine Era (2022–Present): Return to External Structuring

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced not only a military and political response but also a communicative rupture. For the first time in decades, NATO confronted a visible adversary and a shared threat perception, enabling legitimacy to be rebuilt around collective defense. The 2022 Strategic Concept identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" and named China a "strategic challenge."[14] Unlike earlier documents that stressed crisis management or partnerships, it re-centered deterrence, resilience, and defense as NATO's core tasks. This was matched by rapid shifts in resources, an expanded presence on the eastern flank, and the accession of Finland and Sweden. Public diplomacy highlighted unity, resolve, and readiness—keywords absent for years.

This clarity distinguished the Ukraine Era from the War on Terror. Legitimacy no longer had to be constructed around abstract ideals but around visible threats like tanks crossing borders, missiles hitting cities, populations under siege. Such images simplified messaging and reduced internal contestation, as the logic of deterrence resonated more naturally with publics.

Yet limits remain. The return to external structuring provides cohesion but narrows rhetorical flexibility. Questions of double standards, democratic backsliding, and ambivalence in the Global South remain unresolved. Moreover, today's environment is not the Cold War—trust in institutions is weaker, societies are more polarized, the media landscape is fragmented, and global order is multipolar.

NATO's public diplomacy thus faces a

dual challenge—retaining unity against Russia while operating in an environment of skepticism and contestation. Whether this new phase can maintain cohesion without slipping into rigidity or communicative inertia will define the trajectory of NATO's public diplomacy in the post-2022 era.

Conclusion: Structuring Logics of Public Diplomacy

The traced evolution of NATO's public diplomacy across four distinct historical phases. These were not merely chronological shifts, but structural transformations in how the Alliance generates legitimacy and organizes its communicative identity. Rather than responding reactively to each crisis, NATO consistently restructured its public messaging around deeper strategic imperatives. These imperatives followed two fundamental logics: either organizing in response to an external threat or projecting internally defined values outward as a source of legitimacy.

This paper conceptualizes these two logics as distinct modes of strategic self-structuring. First, in periods of *external threat-based structuring*, NATO's legitimacy emerges from the need to respond to a clear external adversary. The Cold War and the post-2022 Ukraine era are shaped by this logic. In both cases, NATO's public diplomacy emphasizes cohesion, deterrence, and defense. The presence of a visible, hostile actor enables clear messaging and fosters internal unity. A structure that is less of interpretation and more unifying by its nature. The attitudes of the individual members are generally more homogeneous here because it is less about national interpretations of rigid concepts.

Second, in periods of *internal identity-based structuring*, NATO does not rely on an external enemy to justify its actions. Instead, it seeks legitimacy through the articulation and projection of its own values—democracy, human rights, and liberal order. This logic defined the Peacekeeping Era of the 1990s and the War on Terror Era of the 2000s and 2010s. Public diplomacy during these years was aspirational, globally oriented, and often internally contested. A structure that is more of interpretation and less unifying by its nature. The attitudes of the individual members are generally less homogeneous here because it is more about national interpretations of rigid concepts.

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Transitions between these phases tend to follow major historical ruptures: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Each of these events reshaped NATO's strategic environment, redirected its institutional focus, and triggered a shift in how legitimacy was constructed. In threat-based phases, NATO speaks with greater clarity and coherence, but at the cost of normative nuance. In identity-based phases, the Alliance aspires to moral leadership, but risks fragmentation and public disillusionment when ideals clash with outcomes. The current Ukraine era signals a return to strategic clarity—but it also marks the narrowing of communicative space. Whether NATO can maintain internal unity while engaging with the complexities of modern publics will determine the future of its public diplomacy.

The Growing Gap Between Geopolitical Reality and Public Expectations

While NATO has recalibrated its posture in response to Russia's 2022 invasion—emphasizing deterrence, great power competition, and systemic rivalry—public

expectations have not shifted accordingly. Many Western societies, and much of the Global South, remain shaped by post-Cold War assumptions of a peace dividend, normative dominance, and strategic disengagement. This creates a widening gap: on one side, a hardened geopolitical reality; on the other, publics whose perceptions are anchored in a different era. The dissonance is particularly evident among younger generations and in societies without a strong historical identification with NATO. More than a rhetorical problem, this divergence exposes a structural challenge for NATO's public diplomacy: its strategic imperatives and societal imagination no longer move in tandem, a novel situation in the Alliance's history.

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The post-2022 era reintroduced deterrence, forward defense, and the language of systemic threats. NATO's Strategic Concept names Russia as its primary adversary and China as a strategic challenge. Yet many Western publics still operate under the ideological residue of the 1990s and early 2000s—belief in perpetual peace, the superiority of liberal values, and the dominance of soft power. As Repnikova,[15] Kaneva, and Manor[16] argue, much of the West remains bound to a normative self-image that is increasingly difficult to sustain. The "liberal peace dividend" after the Cold War deprioritized defense in favor of economic growth, development, and cultural diplomacy.

In Germany, this took shape through deep defense cuts, the suspension of compulsory military service in 2011, and a reluctance to view war as political reality. These choices did not just reduce budgets—they shaped public

consciousness. Against this backdrop, NATO's return to threat-based rhetoric risks colliding with societies unprepared to receive it. Shaped by Nye's concept of soft power, Western publics often view hard power as not only unpopular but morally suspect. While NATO in 2022 spoke the language of deterrence, publics still expected diplomacy, humanitarianism, and normative leadership. This dissonance fuels mistrust and disengagement. For many, a return to Cold War-style structuring appears as a moral regression. The Cold War victory symbolized the triumph of democratic values; to revert to pre-1991 logics risks undermining that achievement.

Schuette further highlights how institutional overlaps between NATO and the European Union complicate the picture.[17] NATO's security-first orientation contrasts with the EU's normative identity, producing a "split personality" in Europe's strategic architecture. This ambiguity confuses audiences and weakens public diplomacy, especially among younger generations, who know NATO less as a protector and more as a distant, bureaucratic institution tied to controversial interventions.

The gap between NATO's messaging and public expectations extends beyond member states. In the Global South, NATO is often viewed through the lens of historical grievance, double standards, and cultural distance. While NATO frames its actions as defensive, publics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America frequently see continuity with imperial legacies and coercive Western power. Interventions in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan have become symbols in anti-Western discourse, undermining NATO's credibility when it appeals to values.[18]

The war in Ukraine has accelerated a shift in how soft power operates. It is no longer enough to project ideals; those ideals must be perceived as legitimate and inclusive. NATO's public diplomacy now functions within a contested and often hostile communicative space, reflecting the decline of Western narrative authority. What

once appeared as universal values, freedom, democracy, and human rights are increasingly seen as the rhetoric of a fading hegemony. This can be understood through the concept of *narrative hegemony*, which is the ability to define legitimacy and marginalize alternatives, rooted in geopolitical dominance. For decades, the West enjoyed this privilege.

Today, competing actors—especially Russia and China—shape global discourse, casting NATO not as a defensive alliance but as an instrument of Western imperial continuity. The breakdown of this position brings NATO and the broader West into what can be defined as the audience dilemma. Western societies expect moral consistency, while the Global South, shaped by colonial histories and selective interventions, views NATO's values with suspicion. In the past, divergent perspectives from smaller actors outside the Western hemisphere could largely be ignored. With the erosion of NATO's status as a narrative hegemon, this is no longer possible. The Alliance must now address two very different publics that demand conflicting behaviors and identities. At the same time, neither audience can be dismissed, as both have gained agency—military, political, and discursive—within the shifting geopolitical landscape and thus exert legitimate influence over the Alliance. Public diplomacy is therefore no longer about broadcasting ideals from a position of authority. It is about defending NATO's right to define meaning itself. In this fractured environment, legitimacy must be re-earned through adaptive, dialogical engagement with multiple publics, each capable and determined to contest the Alliance's message.

The growing gap between NATO's geopolitical logic and public expectations is no longer a matter of miscommunication—it reflects a fundamental structural misalignment between strategic necessity and societal resonance. As NATO reorients itself back toward deterrence, defense, and great power competition, many publics continue to operate within an expectation framework shaped by moral aspiration, historical skepticism, and normative disillusionment. This tension is compounded by the collapse of narrative hegemony. NATO can no longer assume control over the discursive terrain. Its narratives are now contested, reframed, and politicized by actors who reject its claim to moral and strategic authority. Public diplomacy has thus shifted from being a platform of persuasion to a site of struggle over meaning, recognition, and legitimacy.

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At the heart of this transformation lies a revived and unresolved dilemma, which I will name the *audience dilemma*: NATO must simultaneously address internal publics who demand moral coherence and external publics who view moral appeals as instruments of power. What used to be managed through selective engagement can no longer be ignored. In a fragmented and digitalized communicative environment, all audiences now talk back, and since they have gained agency, they expect to be heard.

For NATO, the challenge is existentially communicative. It must preserve strategic clarity in a volatile world while reestablishing legitimacy among publics that no longer grant it by default. Bridging this gap requires not only new messages, but new modes of engagement—dialogical, reflexive, and empirically grounded in the lived realities of diverse societies. Public diplomacy is no longer about promoting consensus; it is about surviving in pluralism.

Fractures in an Era of Re-Nationalization

The re-election of Donald Trump in January 2025 has reignited structural tensions within NATO that go beyond policy disputes—they strike at the Alliance's communicative coherence. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a return to threat-based structuring, the cohesion this provided is now under renewed strain. Trump's unilateral rhetoric, his expansive geopolitical ambitions—such as the revived interest in acquiring Greenland or reclaiming control over the Panama Canal—and his demands for a five-percent GDP military spending threshold introduce an internal dynamic that severely complicates NATO's public diplomacy efforts. These demands are not merely operational—they challenge the Alliance's ability to speak with one voice.

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Public diplomacy, by its very nature, depends on internal alignment. Yet under Trump's renewed leadership, NATO faces a paradox: while it ostensibly returns to a logic of deterrence and strategic clarity, its internal political climate becomes increasingly fragmented. The Ukraine war had offered NATO a rare moment of unity—a visible adversary, a shared threat perception, and a cohesive moral narrative. Trump's rhetoric undermines this coherence by introducing aggressive, national-interest-based claims that alienate allies and fracture the communicative front. This has the potential to not only weaken NATO's ability to engage external publics, but it can also create confusion and disillusionment within its own societies.

While all this has a real world impact on the abilities of NATO, and mainly the security-architecture in Europe, for NATO'S public diplomacy this is predominantly a messaging crisis. It is a breakdown of the Alliance's communicative structure. Trump's foreign policy does not operate within the framework of collective defense, but rather within a transactional logic of strategic dominance. By asserting claims such as the acquisition of Greenland or the unilateral decision to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska to discuss the war in Ukraine, the United States no longer anchors the Alliance in shared values or common threat, but in unilateral ambition.

For the European members of NATO, this poses a dilemma: close ties with the United States are essential for the credibility of deterrence. But how can this credibility, and the strength of transatlantic ties, be ensured and convincingly projected outward when conflicts between the United States and its European allies repeatedly surface? Examples include the debate over the two-percent defense spending target or, more recently, the American condition for further sanctions against Russia that required European partners to first end all purchases of Russian gas and oil. The public airing of such internal disputes undermines the credibility of NATO's collective defense—and with it the very foundation on which effective public diplomacy, both toward allies and adversaries, depends.

Indeed, these developments reawaken the audience dilemma discussed earlier. When internal publics observe erratic leadership and discordant messaging, their trust in NATO diminishes. When external publics witness the Alliance struggling to articulate coherent values, its claim to legitimacy weakens. And when adversaries exploit both, public diplomacy becomes reactive, defensive, and increasingly ineffectual.

What emerges, then, is a structural fracture. Trump's leadership does not merely disrupt policy coordination—it ruptures the communicative

scaffolding on which NATO's public diplomacy has depended. The era that began in 2022 with renewed clarity and external cohesion now risks devolving into internal contradiction and strategic ambiguity. Whether NATO can preserve its post-Ukraine communicative gains or whether the Alliance will lose its most effective mechanism for deterrence—credibility in its collective willingness to defend each other—has become the central question for both its geopolitical future and the effectiveness of its public diplomacy.

One thing is clear—Public diplomacy in this environment cannot fall back on Cold War templates or soft power platitudes. It must directly confront the internal contradictions of an Alliance in which its most powerful member challenges the very traditions by which NATO has narrated itself. If this moment marks another discursive rupture, NATO will require not only new military strategies, but also a new way to narrate them.

Conclusion: Legitimacy in Transition

NATO's public diplomacy has undergone four distinct transformations, each tied to broader shifts in the Alliance's strategic identity. These eras follow two structural logics: legitimacy derived from an external threat (Cold War, Ukraine Era) or constructed through the projection of internally held values (Peacekeeping Era, War on Terror Era). The first logic generated cohesion and communicative clarity around a visible adversary; the second aspired to normative leadership but often produced fragmentation, disillusionment, and contested interpretations of "Western values."

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 seemed to mark a return to the threat-based model. With a visible enemy, NATO regained a communicative anchor absent for decades. Yet this does not recreate the clarity of 1949. Trust in institutions has eroded, societies are fragmented and digitalized, and the West no longer holds

uncontested narrative hegemony—the ability to define legitimacy and marginalize alternatives.

The Alliance now faces a double strain: its geopolitical logic demands renewed deterrence, while its communicative structure is fractured. This has become stark since the re-election of Donald Trump in 2025, whose unilateralism and transactional rhetoric reopened structural fissures just as NATO had rediscovered external cohesion. The result is the revival of the audience dilemma: internal publics demand moral coherence, while external publics, shaped by colonial legacies and selective interventions, view NATO's values with suspicion. Unlike in the past, neither audience can be ignored.

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From this analysis, three conclusions emerge. First, the collapse of narrative hegemony has turned communication from projection into a contested battlefield of meaning. Second, the audience dilemma has become unmanageable through traditional messaging. Third, the re-nationalization of strategic priorities threatens to fracture the core of the Alliance communicative coherence.

NATO's public diplomacy must therefore evolve. It can no longer rely on Cold War templates, soft power abstractions, or centralized narratives. Instead, it must become dialogical, reflexive, and grounded in the realities of multiple publics. This requires operating not from assumed legitimacy, but from negotiated authority. NATO's public diplomacy stands at a crossroads. Whether it fractures under incoherence or evolves into a new paradigm of communicative legitimacy will define the Alliance's role in the decades ahead. *IAJ*

Notes

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