

# NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT: INSPIRED BY THE MASSES?

*Dr Stefanie Babst, NATO's Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, discusses the public discussion about NATO's new Strategic Concept following the Secretary General's decision that NATO should engage the broader publics in both member and partner countries about the Alliance's future direction in a transparent and participatory manner. More than two hundred thousand people followed and participated in this first-ever broad-based discussion that NATO launched in September 2009. Whether the "period of inclusiveness" has changed NATO's public image to the positive depends on the final product –the new Strategic Concept– that the Alliance leaders want to approve at the forthcoming Summit in November 2010 in Portugal.*

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**I**n September 2009, NATO's still-then-new Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, announced that the Transatlantic Alliance would develop its new Strategic Concept and that the process leading to the new Strategy would be "the most open and inclusive process ever in the history of the Alliance". He invited a group of 12 national experts to begin substantial discussions about NATO's future and called upon the public at large to participate in these and other discussions.

On Monday 17 May 2010 at NATO Headquarters, the Group of Experts, chaired by the former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, presented their report, "Analysis and Recommendations on a new Strategic Concept for NATO" to the Secretary General and NATO Ambassadors. This brought nine months of intensive discussions and consultations to an end and with it the so-called period of "inclusiveness and reflection".

Now that the work of the Group of Experts has come to a conclusion, it is time to assess the consultation process. Was the Secretary General's idea to initiate a broad-based public discourse about the Alliance's future a failure or a success? How public were the discussions? Who participated in them? Was the "inclusive period" only an attempt to create the illusion, as some NATO critics claim, that our publics had a say in this process? Should the public have a say at all? Or should such strategic reviews be left to the experts?

### ***Inclusive Consultations: Broad Audiences, Diverse Topics – One Central Message***

Most of the experts' discussions took place in the public limelight – and offered the opportunity for those who were interested to follow and join in the debates. Between September 2009 and May 2010, the experts conducted four international seminars (in Luxembourg, Slovenia, Norway and the United States) and engaged in an impressive number of consultations with civilian and military officials from all Allied and partner countries, independent security experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national and European parliamentarians and representatives from other international organizations. Each of these seminars had parts open to the media, and all of them were accessible to the general public through different websites.

In addition to the official activities of the Group of Experts, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) organized more than 140 outreach activities on the new Strategic Concept in member countries, including conferences, seminars, workshops, background briefings for journalists, essay competitions for students together with multiple digital discussions, with an aim of providing young people the opportunity to

post their ideas and comments about the Alliance's future roles on web platforms. As well as the four official seminars, there were numerous "unofficial" seminars held in Allied and partner countries. Members of the Group of Experts participated in some of these events.

NATO organized, in close cooperation with local think-tanks, NGOs and respective governments, more than 42 public debates, including TV programs, in partner countries together with 17 special information programs for journalists and interested public groups at NATO's Headquarters in Brussels. Interest was particularly high in Russia, Georgia and Ukraine but also other Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) countries as well as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries. As regards to the ICI countries, PDD supported public seminars in Morocco, Egypt, Qatar and Mauritania – all of them open to the media.

Additionally, NATO invited several thousand visitors, many of them students, to discuss the key components of the new Strategic Concept. Between late summer 2009 and spring 2010, NATO hosted more 8,500 visitors from both Allied and partner countries to explain why the Alliance wanted to elaborate a new strategy and why engagement with the public in this process was important to the Alliance.

It goes without saying that the NATO Secretary General played a key role in the entire process. Since August 2009, Anders Fogh Rasmussen gave more than 100 interviews to leading newspapers, TV broadcasters and radio stations – underpinning every time the importance of developing NATO's new strategy with a process which was transparent and one which engaged with the public. He also used his blogs and public speeches to explain why a new Strategic Concept mattered and what he expected it to deliver.

In order to reach out to new audiences, the use of new media is paramount for NATO. On 3 August 2009, PDD launched a dedicated web module<sup>1</sup> and discussion forum.<sup>2</sup> From its launch until early May 2010, the module received more than 122,000 visitors –which is modest compared with Michael Jackson's facebook site– but impressive for an international defense organization. PDD published 48 web stories on the new Strategic Concept, covering background information, a bibliography, key events, speeches and visits of the Secretary General and the Group of Experts. The interested viewer could choose between 70 short videos featuring debates about NATO's future role in Afghanistan, the Allies' relations with Russia, the Comprehensive Approach, NATO's contribution towards the

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<sup>1</sup> "NATO's New Strategic Concept", [www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html)

<sup>2</sup> "Discussion Forum", <http://natostratcon.info>

implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and many more themes. The videos were regularly uploaded on YouTube, Daily motion, Live leak, Vimeo, Google Videos, Yahoo videos, mySpace TV, metacafe and others and thus reached thousands of primarily young people.

The discussion forum, a central element of NATO's offer to the public to participate in live online discussions, was visited by almost 10,000 people. People from many corners of the world, including Australia, Russia and Pakistan participated in the online discussions, expressing often very detailed proposals and views on how NATO should cope with the new security challenges.

A special highlight of the Alliance's digital outreach was the "Security Jam", an initiative jointly organized by NATO, the European Union and a Brussels think tank (Security and Defense Agenda). For six consecutive days, a quasi "permanent online discussion" allowed 3,000 security and defense experts from around the globe to exchange their views about key international security issues, including the transatlantic Alliance's new strategy, with prominent policy-makers.

In the consultation process on the new Strategic Concept, NATO engaged with over two hundred thousand people – thus reaching far beyond the community of transatlantic security and defense experts.

### ***Living Up to Public Expectations – Five Observations***

The consultation process with the public, academia, experts, think-tanks, NGOs, partner countries and other international organizations is over. Between now and the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, the discussions about the Alliance's new strategic direction will take place in the political and diplomatic arenas of Allied capitals and NATO Headquarters. Over the coming months, using the report of the Group of Experts as a guiding document, NATO's Secretary General will write his own draft of the new Strategic Concept. In mid-September, the Secretary General's draft will be presented to the Allies for formal negotiations.

1. NATO, like any other international organization, relies on the political and public support of its Member countries. So there is nothing wrong with engaging the public to contribute to the debates about the organization's future strategy. Their opinions matter to this organization which is charged with the responsibility of defending the territories in which they live in. In this regard it is noteworthy to point out that neither the European Union when developing its European Security Strategy nor the United Nations has conducted their strategy discussions in public. NATO, in turn, can proud itself –and rightly so– that it has not simply talked about engaging the public but actually embarked on a dedicated process.

2. The consultation process on the – new Strategic Concept provided a unique opportunity for further engagement with the public on this particular issue. Many factors influence how NATO is perceived. These include the leadership of the organization, success or failure in Afghanistan, the state of U.S.-European relations, enlargement or issues related to the immediate neighbourhood of a country. A guiding political document, which is important to the organization, may not be perceived as important by the public, in particular at a time when the organization is engaged in a major campaign. Therefore it was crucial that the public were involved in contributing to the debate which will shape the posture of the Alliance over the next decades. The emerging security challenges – such as cyber security and climate change– means that post-Afghanistan NATO must be ready and willing to act in the face of such challenges. In order to remain on the right side of public support, emerging security challenges must be explained to the public. This consultation process did just that.

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3. The final product, which is the new Strategic Concept, must offer clear and compelling responses to the questions raised during the public discourse about NATO’s future strategic direction. What exactly is the Allies’ strategy to effectively protect their citizens from external security threats? Which threats can NATO realistically cope with and which ones are out of reach? How will the Allies better connect to other international organizations and actors to deter potential enemies and tackle security risks before they arrive at our doorsteps?

Given the hard realities of the current strategic environment, answering these and other key questions are mandatory. NATO is fighting terrorists six thousand kilometers away from Europe. It is confronted by a host of threats that come in multiple forms, ranging from the proliferation of nuclear missiles and increasingly debilitating cyber attacks to energy security and religious extremism. In contrast to the Cold War, NATO’s enemies cannot be deterred any longer by battalions of tanks and conventional forces taking position in well-defined geographical spots. Today’s threats come in very different forms than only some ten years ago.

The new challenges are not just looming on the horizon. They are already on our doorstep. Addressing them effectively is what NATO needs to do. Against this background, NATO's new Strategic Concept must offer more than diplomatic buzz words – otherwise, it will fade away only too quickly in the public's mind and the Allies risk to lose credibility.

4. National governments must continue to engage their publics on transatlantic issues and convincingly explain why it is important to forge a strong transatlantic partnership. It is not sufficient if only the Secretary General passes this message on. Both at home and towards foreign audiences Alliance leaders must demonstrate that they remain committed to the Alliance and ready and capable to lead NATO with resolve and determination into the next decade. The Lisbon Summit in November 2010 will be the ideal moment to convey this message to the public in Allied countries and beyond. However, a short historical moment that is captured in the traditional family portray at the NATO Summit will not do the trick.

5. The new Strategic Concept must be translated into practice. NATO's "D-Day" starts on 21 November 2010 when the Heads of State and Government have approved the new strategy at their Summit meeting in Lisbon. The publics in Member and partner countries will carefully watch how the Allies will implement what they have approved on a piece of paper.

The Group of Experts, in their comprehensive and detailed report, have made some good proposals on how NATO's future strategy could look like. It is now up to the Allies do follow-up on these proposals in order to develop a strategy which will help the Alliance to navigate through the troubled waters of the 21st century security environment.