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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The look of NATO: Comparing visual representations of military force and alliance identity in 1984 and 2021

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Abstract

As social identities are not static but made, actors constantly invest in their public image, financially, institutionally, and aesthetically. This article examines and compares two vignettes of NATO's public (visual) diplomacy and strategic communication. It shows the changing nature of the visual communication that NATO has applied to rationalise its military force and to fix its collective identity. In addition, the article illustrates that the changing visual communication of the alliance shapes and is shaped by its identity constructions and its quest for ontological security. For the vignette of a force comparison report from 1984, authored by the NATO Information Service, I argue that technical images are conditioning the sensible and possible by normalising the deployment of military force and disciplining anxieties about the self, deterrence, and defence. This look is based on spatial divisions, absent people, and relational objects. Compared to the vignette of NATO's more recent social media campaign, #NATO2030, published in 2021, I argue that the latter reveals the progressive nature of the alliance by gaze to gender, diversity, and collective security. This shift from a deterrence-fixed to a human-faced episteme symbolises NATO's ability to secure a stable self while adopting its public diplomacy.

Keywords: NATO; ontological security; public diplomacy; visual representations

Introduction

Governments and international organisations increasingly invest in their public image, financially, institutionally, and aesthetically. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is no exception and applies a variety of public diplomacy tools to envision a powerful, lasting, and even lovable political and military community with a stable sense of its identity.[1] By ontological security, International Relations (IR) scholars refer to an actor's confidence in her being and thus the ability to maintain a social relation, or 'security as being' as Giddens calls it.[2] As a concept, ontological security resonates with what many scholars traditionally called 'identity', 'self', and 'we-ness', emphasising that identity is both socially constructed and in flux. Ontological security highlights the precarious nature of identity and directs our attention to those practices that create and secure

[1] Michael C. Williams and Iver B. Neumann, 'From alliance to security community: NATO, Russia, and the power of identity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 357–87; Veronica M Kitchen, *The Globalization of NATO: Intervention, Security and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Helene Sjursen, 'On the identity of NATO', *International Affairs*, 80:4 (2004), pp. 687–703; Merje Kuus, '"Love, peace and Nato": Imperial subject-making in central Europe', *Antipode*, 39:2 (2007), pp. 357–387.

[2] Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'An introduction to the special issue: Ontological securities in world politics', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 3–11 (p. 4).

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a self: 'Since all social actors need a stable sense of self in order to realise a sense of agency, managing that fundamental anxiety is an ongoing project. Actors are viewed as ontologically secure when they feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognised in and through their relations with others.'[3]

Assuming that public diplomacy and strategic communication are powerful tools for creating a stable sense of self, this article zooms in on two vignettes of NATO to understand how the alliance envisions itself. How do 'we', as scholars and citizens, see – or how are we made to see – the power and identity of NATO? In its own words, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division 'works actively to strengthen the Alliance's public image, promoting understanding, trust in and support for the Alliance'.[4] Given that an actor must manage anxieties about her identity, public diplomacy and strategic communication become powerful tools to create, shape, and distribute a sense of self.

By exploring vignettes from 1984 and 2021, the article makes two contributions: first, it shows the changing nature of the visual communication NATO applied to rationalise its military force, fix its collective identity, and legitimise its policies. While the changing nature of visual communication is not surprising, the comparison shows how different visual genres intersect with identity constructions. Second, the article illustrates how the changing visual communication of the alliance shapes and is shaped by its identity. For the vignette of a disclosed report on 'NATO and the Warsaw Pact – Force Comparisons' from 1984, authored by the NATO Information Service, I argue that technical images are conditioning the sensible and possible by normalising the deployment of military force and disciplining anxieties about deterrence, defence, and a transatlantic self. This look is based on spatial divisions, absent people, and relational objects. Compared to the vignette of NATO's more recent social media campaign #NATO2030, published in 2021, I argue that the latter reveals the progressive nature of the alliance by shifting our look to gender, diversity, and collective security. As a professionally produced image campaign tailor-made for social media distribution, this video imagines a perpetual and affective community of people, not only states, transcending spatial, social, and military divisions. This shift from a deterrence-fixed to a human-faced episteme symbolises NATO's ability to secure a stable self while adopting its public diplomacy.

This article proceeds with a discussion of the growing literature on public diplomacy and strategic communication in general and applied to NATO specifically. While many scholars have already explored the more recent activities of the transatlantic alliance to shape its identity through strategic and visual communication, a historically comparative perspective is only just beginning to emerge. After briefly summarising my methodological choices and analytical steps, I turn to two vignettes from 1984 and 2021 to illustrate the shifting visual and identity discourses of NATO and to show the added value of a historically informed comparison. In conclusion, I outline three topics for further research to contribute to a better understanding of how the alliance's management of anxieties and its aesthetic investment in a stable sense of self and self-assurance works.

NATO's public diplomacy and strategic communication

Traditionally, public diplomacy refers to government-led practices of engaging with foreign societies.[5] Gilboa defines public diplomacy as 'a communication process states, nonstate actors, and organizations employ to influence the policies of a foreign government by influencing its citizens'.[6] These practices frequently aim to shape public opinions beneficial to the political leadership. Strategic communication is a central tool for shaping the public image of a state or international

[3]Ibid.

[4]NATO Public Diplomacy Division's Co-Sponsorship Grants, available at: {https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/63610.htm#:~:text=The%20NATO%20Public%20Diplomacy%20Division,and%20support%20for%20the%20Alliance}.

[5]Eytan Gilboa (ed.), *A Research Agenda for Public Diplomacy* (Edward Elgar, 2023).

[6]Ibid., p. 3.

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organisation. As the term already signals, such communication deliberately targets a specific audience to influence its perceptions.[7] Strategic communication refers to the 'purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission'.[8] Actors usually combine stories and visuals to distribute a favourable self-image and situate their activities within a broader public diplomacy frame.

While public diplomacy as a political activity had already gained significance during the Cold War, the evolution of the internet and the transformation of communication infrastructures contributed to the swift rise of digital formats. Digital diplomacy refers to 'the use of digital technologies, such as social media and other online platforms … by ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and international organizations (IOs) to communicate with each other and the general public, conduct diplomacy, and advance foreign policy goals'.[9] Today, public diplomacy and strategic communication are not limited to governments and heavily rely on digital technologies, especially social media platforms, to 'reach a wider audience and connect with people in different parts of the world in real-time'.[10] In addition, foreign ministries and IOs look 'more transparent and accountable to the public' through digital diplomacy, for example, when summit meetings are livestreamed.[11]

Most international and regional organisations are active on social media platforms, curating content and reaching out to publics.[12] Accordingly, scholarly literature exploring how the North Atlantic Alliance develops communication strategies for the digital world is steadily growing, for example, when Angelina Jolie visits NATO headquarters or Lasse Matberg, a social media celebrity and (former) Royal Norwegian Navy lieutenant, features as 'the face of NATO' on social media.[13] In addition, scholars situate public relations campaigns by NATO in the broader context of critical military and gender studies to explore the identity discourses shaped by the alliance's public activities.[14] While much research on NATO's public diplomacy looks at cases from the last decade, often involving digital and online activities, Linda Risso's work on the evolution of NATO's political communication infrastructure helps to contextualise ongoing trends within a broader historical context.[15]

NATO's communication infrastructure is multilayered. The Secretary-General, until 1 October 2024 Jens Stoltenberg, is NATO's chief spokesperson and the head of the International Staff.

[7]Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014); Rhys Crilley, 'Seeing strategic narratives?', *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:3 (2015).

[8]Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčič and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 'Defining strategic communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 3–35 (p. 3).

[9]Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor, 'Introduction: Understanding digital diplomacy. The grammar rules and patterns of digital disruption', in Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 3–28.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Corneliu Bjola and Ruben Zaiotti, *Digital Diplomacy and International Organisations: Autonomy, Legitimacy and Contestation* (Routledge, 2020).

[13]Katharine A. M. Wright, 'Telling NATO's story of Afghanistan: Gender and the alliance's digital diplomacy', *Media, War & Conflict*, 12:1 (2019), pp. 87–101; Katharine A. M. Wright and Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO's strategic narratives: Angelina Jolie and the alliance's celebrity and visual turn', *Review of International Studies*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 443–66; Elsa Hedling, Emil Edenborg, and Sanna Strand, 'Embodying military muscles and a remasculinized West: Influencer marketing, fantasy, and "the face of NATO"', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:1 (2022), pp. 1–12; Katharine Wright, 'NATO's digital diplomacy', in Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 475–90.

[14]Wright, 'Telling NATO's story of Afghanistan'; Rhys Crilley, 'Like and share forces: Making sense of military social media sites', in L. J. Shepherd and C. Hamilton (eds), *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 51–67. Maria Mälksoo, 'A ritual approach to deterrence: I am, therefore I deter', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:1 (2021), pp. 53–78; Sorana Jude, 'Geopolitical imaginations of war preparations: Visual representations of the Romanian armed forces' military exercises', *Critical Military Studies*, 9:3 (2022), pp. 404–24.

[15]Linda Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War: The NATO Information Service* (Routledge, 2014).

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He is supported by a NATO Spokesperson, Farah Dakhlallah, who is responsible for public messaging and strategic advice to the Secretary-General, the North Atlantic Council, commands, and NATO's press offices on the press, media, and social media. Today's professional social media campaigns prolong the activities of the NATO Information Service (NATIS), established in 1950.[16] While NATIS had a 'central role in coordinating pro-NATO and anti-communist propaganda campaigns',[17] today's Public Diplomacy Division, a merger of the Office of Information and Press as well as the Science Program in 2003, 'harmonises all public diplomacy activities and coordinates communication activities NATO-wide', as it says on its webpage.[18] An Assistant Secretary-General for Public Diplomacy, Maria-Doha Besancenot, leads the Public Diplomacy Division (PDD).[19] Within the structure of NATO, the Committee on Public Diplomacy (CPD), created in 2004, 'acts as an advisory body to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) on communication, media and public engagement issues'.[20]

As Wright outlines in a recent contribution, 'NATO's approach to digital diplomacy has evolved significantly' as the alliance curates a range of social media platforms:[21] YouTube since 2008 with 438,000 subscribers, Twitter (now X) since 2009 with 1.9 million followers, Facebook since 2010 with 1.8 million followers, Instagram since 2014 with 1.4 million followers, Telegram since 2022, but no official TikTok account. In this article, I mainly focus on the side of strategic communication, internally labelled StratCom, as 'the praxis of drafting and distributing narratives' that 'tell us and the world who we are, what is our worldview and what do we aim for',[22] i.e. how the alliance creates and shares campaigns to manage anxieties and craft a stable self-image. What the alliance is actually doing online 'falls between strategic communication … and public diplomacy', projecting strategic narratives, listening to and engaging with audiences in member states and worldwide.[23] While there is an extensive debate around the relationship between public relations, public diplomacy, and strategic communication,[24] I follow a pragmatic, actor-sensible approach. As NATO officials are running campaigns under the institutional header of the PDD, and its predecessor, I understand strategic communication as central means of public diplomacy. These 'activities are designed to influence members of foreign publics to adopt attitudes or opinions that are favorable toward the policies or products of an organization or nation'.[25]

In practice, NATO's public diplomacy in general, and its growing focus on social media, serve different aims.[26] First, they are an attempt to control and distribute a positive identity of the Alliance

[16]Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War*; Linda Risso, '"Don't mention the Soviets!" An overview of the short films produced by the NATO Information Service between 1949 and 1969', *Cold War History*, 9:4 (2009), pp. 501–12.

[17]Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War*, p. 5.

[18]Communications and public diplomacy, available at: {https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69275.htm}.

[19]Yannis A. Stivachtis, 'From national to international actorness: International organizations and the transformation of public diplomacy. The cases of the European Union and NATO', in Francis Onditi, Gilad Ben-Nun, Katharina McLarren, Pontian Okoth and Yannis A. Stivachtis (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Diplomatic Thought and Practice in the Digital Age* (Cham: Springer, 2023), pp. 459–82.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Wright, 'NATO's digital diplomacy'.

[22]Jan Hanska, 'From narrated strategy to strategic narratives', *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 323–25 (pp. 323–4). In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO members established an independent Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, located in Riga, Latvia. For more information, see 'Russia's 'nformation influence operations in the Baltic – Nordic region', available at: {https://stratcomcoe.org}.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Martin Löffelholz, Claudia Auer, and Alice Srugies, 'Strategic dimensions of public diplomacy', in Ansgar Zerfass and Derina Holtzhausen (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 439–58; Hallahan et al., 'Defining strategic communication'.

[25]Mark A. Van Dyke and Dejan Verčič, 'Public relations, public diplomacy, and strategic communication: An international model of conceptual convergence', in Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Verčič (eds), *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 910–31 (p. 911).

[26]Stefanie Babst, 'Reinventing NATO's Public Diplomacy', Research Paper / NATO Defence College 41 (November 2008).

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and its policies. The ability to control the flow of information has always been a source of power. By communicating directly with an audience, ministries and IOs firmly control the information they share and the public image they intend to evoke, at least in theory. While this is true for off- as well as online worlds, digitisation enables a new style of communication that is characterised by lower production costs, speed, and global outreach. Second, sharing stories intends to counter and challenge anti-NATO narratives, both within the Alliance and externally. Such activities were essential during the Cold War and continue today on the World Wide Web. Third, as all major organisations now have a public diplomacy and outreach department, strategy, and social media accounts, it represents a professional and progressive self-image.[27] Fourth, social media helps create an affective relation symbolised by the like-and-follow buttons users can press or by comment functions. While many public diplomacy efforts are one-directional, digital technologies enable the public to engage with ministries or IOs actively, for instance, by leaving comments below shared content on social media platforms. However, critics, as well as digital trolls, use such interactive hubs, too. Finally, shaping its image through public relations strengthens NATO's ontological security or, in other words, the confirmation of itself as a distinct actor. The narratives and images created represent those practices that contribute to NATO's ontological security – why the Alliance exists, what it does, and why it should continue to exist or even expand and deepen. Such self-confirming activities are essential because political leaders have repeatedly questioned the need for NATO, ranging from US Senator Richard Lugar's 'out-of-business' debate to French President Macron's judgement that NATO is 'brain-dead'.[28] Whether the Alliance should persist, and if so, in what form and with what purpose, are questions always in play. NATO's public diplomacy and strategic communication speak to such anxieties about the self, conceptually and empirically.

Methodological choices and steps

Looking at NATO's 75-year history, the alliance has a long-standing tradition of public diplomacy and strategic communication. The quantity of NATO-related media products since its foundation in 1949 is enormous and still awaiting a more systematic study to understand how the alliance narrates, images, and stabilises a self in comparison.[29] Given the variety of visual and audio-visual data produced by NATO's public diplomacy division and its predecessor, scholars can choose from multiple genres, periods, and policies. While research on NATO's more recent public diplomacy is steadily growing,[30] earlier activities from the Cold War are rarely analysed. The central aim of the empirical section is to identify two starting points for a comparative analysis. The 'selection process' is informed by the research question and my interest in how visual communication and identity-making intersect. It reflects an 'interpretive documentary research strategy' that 'follows the "intertextual" trail from initial documents to related ones – Ferguson's "Oh, look, there's another one ..." experience'.[31] My choice of these vignettes from a wide range of public diplomacy activities reflects two considerations.

First, by choosing widely perceived cases from the 1980s and the 2020s, I want to understand how the alliance applies visual modes and media to shape its public image. There are a few

[27] Bjola and Zaiotti, *Digital Diplomacy and International Organisations*.

[28] Interview of French President Emmanuel Macron with *The Economist*, 7 November 2019. Available at: {https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english}.

[29] The NATO online archive covers over 4,700 documents for the Public Diplomacy Division/Information Sevice/Office of Information and Press sub-fund and nearly 1,000 documents for publications authorised by NATO. Available at {https://archives.nato.int/public-diplomacy-division-information-service-office-of-information-and-press}.

[30] Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor, 'NATO's digital public diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 19:2 (2020), pp. 77–87; Hedling, Edenborg, and Strand, 'Embodying military muscles and a remasculinized West'; Wright, 'Telling NATO's story of Afghanistan'; Jude, 'Geopolitical imaginations of war preparations'.

[31] Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 70.

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publications on the booklets from the 1980s and a much broader discussion of the NATO 2030 campaign as a strategic reflection process.[32] By comparing two vignettes from a different historical and political context, scholars may see more clearly how aesthetic choices shape representations of power and identity, and how they contribute to sensing a stable self. As recently emphasised by Kanela, Dolea, and Manor in a forum on 'Public diplomacy and nation branding in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine War', 'there is a lot to learn from comparing propaganda messages from the Russia–Ukraine War to themes and tropes that were used in Cold War propaganda or in other military conflicts – past and present. Scholars often prioritize novelty and change in their studies, but identifying and analyzing continuities and repeating patterns across time and space can be equally important.'[33] While I would be hesitant to define the 1984 and 2021 campaigns as primarily 'propagandistic', a historical comparison shows that NATO has always tried to shape its public image through a diversity of media and genres. A historical-comparative perspective helps unpack the continuities and changes within NATO's self-representation.

Second, I chose documents that foreground visuals as a critical device to represent the alliance. Several academics and practitioners assume that public diplomacy and strategic communications have become more or even dominantly visual.[34] One reason contributing to this observation is the fact that some of the fastest-growing social media platforms/technologies, such as Instagram and TikTok, accentuate the visual side of communication.[35] While it is self-evident that the production conditions and the aesthetics of images have changed over time, NATO's self-representations are not independent of the choice of visual media.

Looking back at the 1980s when the Transatlantic Alliance and the Warsaw Pact waged a kind of 'booklet war', I chose a declassified report on NATO's military force from 1984.[36] This historical vignette shows how technical images like charts and diagrams have been essential to visualise deterrence and defence in a time when public controversies over arms modernisation were high. In contrast to more recent campaigns on social media such as #NATO2023, the alliance actively curates online platforms with content tailor-made for global distribution and circulation in the digital age. Thus, the second vignette illustrates how the nature and aesthetics of public communication have changed. However, both vignettes show that NATO's public diplomacy efforts, either print or digital, contribute to achieving a stable self within a changing (geopolitical) context. As these two vignettes are just a starting point for implementing a more systematic and structured study on NATO's visual data, this article illustrates the practicality of a discourse approach combined with an iconological procedure to study visual representations of military force and identity formation. While the look of NATO in the 1980s was based on charts and diagrams that visualised weapon systems as a sociotechnical machinery of security, today, the alliance looks like an lovable and modern community run by people and acting for the people.

Pragmatically, I follow an iconological procedure by looking at the visual itself to explore NATO's identity and security discourse.[37] As Hansen recommends, I contextualise the visuals within the wider political discourse in the first stage.[38] In the second stage, I turn to the document

[32]Sara Bjerg Moller and Sten Rynning, 'Revitalizing transatlantic relations: NATO 2030 and beyond', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:1 (2021), pp. 177–97; Richard J. Herzog and John K. Wildgen, 'Tactics in military propaganda documents: A content analysis of illustrations', *Defense Analysis*, 2:1 (1986), pp. 35–46.

[33]Nadia Kaneva, Alina Dolea, and Ilan Manor, 'Public diplomacy and nation branding in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine War', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 19:2 (2023), pp. 185–89 (p. 188).

[34]Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018).

[35]For social media trends, see 'Global social media statistics', available at: {https://datareportal.com/social-media-users}.

[36]Alternative historical documents could be anniversary brochures, flyers, and posters. More recent activities include the widely acknowledged #WeAreNATO (since 2017) and the Protect the Future (2023) campaigns.

[37]Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 51–74.

[38]Ibid., p. 53.

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itself and outline its specific aesthetic characteristics, such as the formal composition and the relation between visuals and other modes (e.g. colour, text).[39] Then, I discuss how the visuals produce meaning and knowledge by stabilising a specific self-representation of the alliance and its policies. Here, I reflect on the intertextual and inter-iconic relations established by the visual representations constituting NATO's ontological security. Finally, I will discuss the performativity of the visuals by offering an interpretation of how they work politically and emotionally to manage anxieties about the self.

Given the distinct history and aesthetics of the two vignettes, I adjusted the procedures accordingly. While the symbolic nature of technical images from 1984 fits well into an iconological procedure, analysing the 2021 YouTube video calls for a more nuanced multimodal approach. By multimodality, van Leeuwen refers to the combination and intersection of various semiotic modes, such as texts, visuals, and sounds.[40] In addition, the vignettes belong to distinct visual genres and thus constitute the relation between the visual and 'the real' differently.[41] Maps, graphs, and bar diagrams refer to a scientific episteme of accuracy and objectivity, while the directed and edited footage for the YouTube video applies typical advertisement and entertainment styles. In addition, visual genres operate with distinct emotional registers. NATO's style of tables and charts is visually simple, and the emotional framing of technical images is assumed to be low.[42] The YouTube video, in comparison, is meant to be an emotional expression of the actor's self-image.

Self-representations of the Atlantic Alliance

Representations actively shape public visions of reality and thereby contribute to what we know about the world.[43] While some things become visible, alternative representations and realities remain invisible, sidelined, and hidden. As Bleiker famously argued, the gap between representation and the represented directs our attention to power and politics.[44] Bringing ontological security and visual representations in conversation, the distribution of narratives and images through public diplomacy is a powerful tool for NATO to manage anxieties and create a stable sense of self. Such representations are consequential because they define the conditions of possibility, for example, how the alliance imagines itself and what an audience is able and enabled to know about NATO by looking at maps or watching a YouTube video. This implies, that the ability to represent shapes the discursive boundaries of action. It makes the world and its spaces, people, and objects governable.[45] While actors frequently govern through naturalised, gendered and racialised representations, zooming in on vignettes from two diverse periods will illustrate how different this may look.

[39]Lene Hansen, 'How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88 (p. 277).

[40]Theo Van Leeuwen, 'Multimodality', in Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (eds), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Wiley, 2015), pp. 447–65 (p. 447).

[41]Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies', p. 60.

[42]Bjola and Manor speak of four grammar rules for digital diplomacy: 'visual simplicity, emotional framing, computational personalization, and engagement hybridization' (p. 5).

[43]Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Routledge, 1989).

[44]Roland Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33.

[45]Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley, 'Scopic regimes and the visual turn in International Relations: Seeing world politics through the drone', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 431–57; Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*; Hansen, 'How images make world politics'; William A. Callahan, *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Juha A. Vuori and Rune Saugmann Andersen (eds), *Visual Security Studies* (Routledge, 2018).

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Vignette 1984: The booklet 'NATO and the Warsaw Pact – force comparisons'

Contextualisation in the wider political discourses: Disputes over military balance in the 1980s

After the failure of SALT II and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, political debates of the early 1980s concerted on the implementation of NATO's double-track decision and the modernisation of intermediate nuclear forces (INF). In 1983, President Ronald Reagan set the tone for the Second Cold War with his 'evil empire' speech, adding a religious and moral side to the already-tense relations with the Soviet Union and the members of the Warsaw Pact. It was only in 1987 that the INF treaty was signed by Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985. SIPRI's data on military expenditure indicates that the United States (US) increased its spending compared to the 1970s and invested over 6 per cent of its GDP in arms and forces between 1982 and 1988.[46]

Studies show that European partners had doubts about the reliability of the US in the case of a conflict with the Soviet Union. Many were sceptical about 'Reagan's roller-coaster approach to arms control'.[47] Stuart writes that there was a 'new defence consciousness among key European Allies during the 1980s'.[48] For example, the French government led by President Mitterrand prioritised European self-reliance and French leadership. UK Prime Minister Thatcher enhanced British military capabilities by investing in the Trident programme while facing fights for the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. Thomas Risse-Kappen shows that West Germany changed from an outspoken supporter of US-based nuclear deterrence to a strong advocate of nuclear arms control.[49] Public perception of a Soviet threat declined from high levels in the early 1980s.[50] Military build-up and Reagan's 'evil empire' rhetoric paradoxically 'eroded the public support for his defense policy', Risse-Kappen summarises.[51] Anti-nuclear weapon protests grew in the US and Europe, and the House of Representatives voted in favour of a nuclear freeze resolution to halt the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons in 1983.

Given this political context of the 1980s, campaigns to reunite the US and Western Europe emerged in response to domestic critique and new Soviet policies. Several booklets on military force can be interpreted as an effort to regain support at most and minimise open dissent at least. The US authorised editions on 'Soviet Military Power' in 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1991, and booklets on 'Whence the Threat to Peace', published by the USSR, date to 1982, 1984, and 1987. Although these booklets' production and publication context remains vague,[52] one can assume that editions in different languages were published to target specific national audiences and experts. NATO became involved with a booklet titled 'NATO and the Warsaw Pact – force comparisons', authored by the NATO Information Service Brussels. The report takes a closer look at the military capabilities of the Warsaw Pact and the Atlantic Alliance.[53] Already the first edition of the report from 1982 established a set of graphics in black and white, and turned these into red and blue coloured plates in 1984. Due to military conventions, the colours represent opponents in training exercises. An English and a French version of the 1984 edition are available in NATO's online archive.

[46]SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, available at: {https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex}.

[47]Douglas Stuart, 'NATO in the 1980s: Between European pillar and European home', *Armed Forces & Society*, 16:3 (1990), pp. 421–36 (p. 426).

[48]Stuart, 'NATO in the 1980s', p. 428.

[49]Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Public opinion, domestic structure, and foreign policy in liberal democracies', *World Politics*, 43:4 (1991), pp. 479–512 (p. 483).

[50]Risse-Kappen, 'Public opinion, domestic structure, and foreign policy in liberal democracies', p. 495.

[51]Risse-Kappen, 'Public opinion, domestic structure, and foreign policy in liberal democracies', p. 501.

[52]Herzog and Wildgen, 'Tactics in military propaganda documents'.

[53]For the meaning of comparison in IR, see Thomas Müller, Mathias Albert, and Kerrin Langer, 'Practices of comparison and the making of international orders', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:3 (2022), pp. 834–59.

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The technical image

Military force is regularly represented by diagrams, charts, and maps – what I call technical images. These visuals are produced by technical devices and act as tools in their own right.[54] Technical images mobilise a specific set of knowledge and emotional registers that often support naturalisation, rationalisation, and efficient management. Commonly used to illustrate research results, technical images like bar diagrams are performative by generating knowledge and facilitating sensibilities. In the case of force representations, for example, they naturalise and depoliticise stockpiles of weapons by representing them as numbers and icons instead of deadly tools to kill people. By countering anxieties and insecurities, they create a feeling of control and competence. They order space and enable military strategists to deploy and move weapons on an imaginary board.[55] As Çapan and dos Reis write 'techniqualities render political projects "scientific"' and make actors, things, and events governable.[56]

NATO's graphs and diagrams often do not accurately or objectively illustrate capabilities. Instead, they convey politically shaped knowledge, not scientific knowledge. They are polysemic in nature, belonging to both the world of geopolitics (content) and the world of scientific representation (form). Like political cartographies, they apply an aesthetic of spatial divisions, absent people, and relational objects.[57] The emotional potential of such technical images seems to be low as they invisibilise ambiguities, uncertainties, and contingencies.

Aesthetically, a technical image is characterised by its formal composition and design. It is literally made by composing and relating elements like forms and colours. Despite their obvious constructedness, they represent knowledge in a visual-textual mode as a shortcut for often politically and scientifically controversial matters. In addition, there is a standard way to compose a graph with bars, to map a geographical area, or to indicate relations by lines, bows, and arrows. Symbols and icons feature prominently to represent weapon systems and forces. Although figures reduce complexities, they claim to be accurate, objective, and truthful.

A *bar diagram* (chart or graph) is a type of graphical representation that uses rectangular bars to display data. In general, the length or height of each bar corresponds to the magnitude or value of the data it represents, making it easy to compare and visualise different categories. The chart's horizontal axis typically represents the categories being compared, while the vertical axis represents the values or frequencies of each category. Bar diagrams are widely used and convey information easily.

Figure 1 (see Appendix, part II for all figures) looks like a typical bar diagram, using different colours and adding icons (instead of words) to identify the compared categories. The chart presents a quantitative comparison of forces between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Its visual grammar is easy to read, from left to right and bottom to top (and vice versa). Icons for each military branch and equipment and colouring help distinguish the bars. Blue stands for NATO, red for the Warsaw Pact, a soldier with a rifle for military personnel. NATO outnumbers the Warsaw Pact in only one category, namely 'transport/support helicopters'.

Diagrams are supposed to be exact as they represent a key scientific mode of visualising facts. In Figure 1, though, the relations between the force categories are distorted regarding the absolute numbers. The red bar for Soviet main battle tanks, 46,230 in number, is minimally lower than the red bar for Soviet artillery, 38,800 in number.

Bar diagrams are abstract, frequently synonymous with quantifiable and objective depictions of an uncontested and apolitical reality. Common wisdom says that you cannot argue about numbers

[54] Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel, and Birgit Schneider, *The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 1.

[55] Carol Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12:4 (1987), pp. 687–718.

[56] Zeynep Gülşah Çapan and Filipe dos Reis, 'Creating colonisable land: Cartography, "blank spaces", and imaginaries of empire in nineteenth-century Germany', *Review of International Studies,* 50:1 (2024), pp. 146–70.

[57] Çapan and dos Reis, 'Creating colonisable land'.

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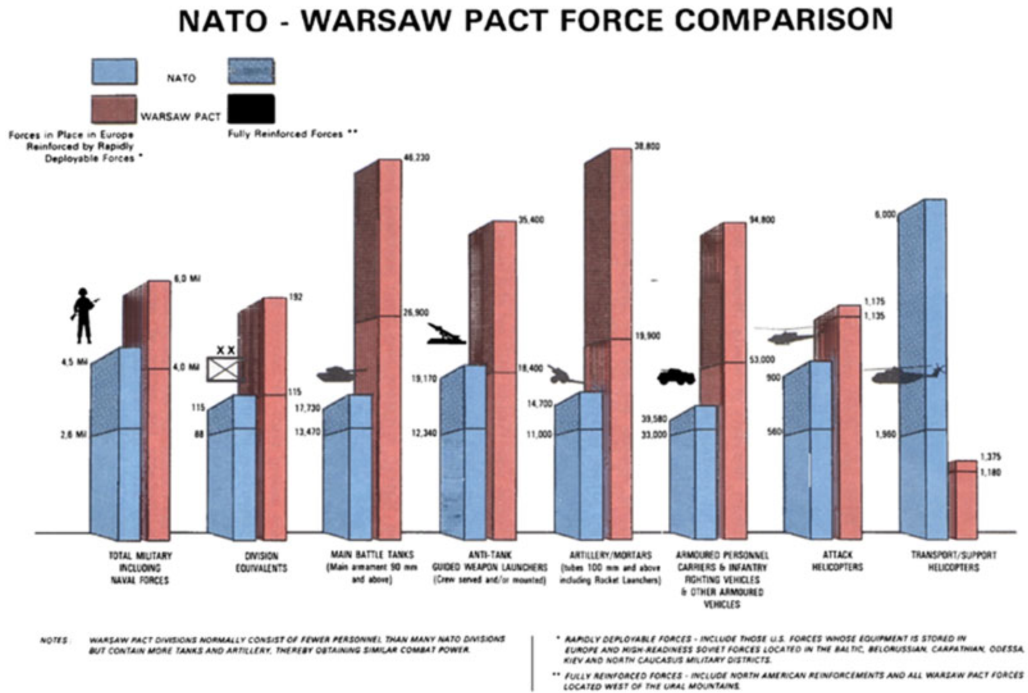

Figure 1. Force comparison (NATO Information Service, 1984); creator: unknown.

but only count differently. However, a diagram's objectivity is a myth, as designers create and relate the key visual elements so that the message is best conveyed.

Line graphs can add a temporal dimension to comparisons. It is a type of chart that displays information as a series of data points connected by straight lines or curves. Line graphs are commonly used to illustrate trends or changes in data over time, although they can also be used to show other types of relationships between variables. The horizontal axis typically represents time or another continuous variable in a line graph, while the vertical axis represents the measured data value. Each data point is represented by a dot or other symbols, and these points are connected by straight lines to show how the data changes over time or across the range of variables.

In Figure 2, a time span from 1973 to 1983 is scaled on the horizontal axis and strategic force parity, respectively advantage (and by implication disadvantage), on the vertical axis. In addition, 'parity' marks the horizontal middle, dividing the diagram into an upper blue and lower red rectangle.

While it takes some time to decipher the diagram, the visual move clearly represents a decline in NATO's advantage, with three out of four curves crossing parity.

Visualisations of change and continuity frequently use *timelines*. Figure 3 spatialises and temporalises, in this case, the modernisation of short- and intermediate-range delivery systems from 1955 to 1983. On the vertical axis, the scale refers to the categories of 'artillery', 'missiles', and 'aircraft'.

In general, the figure conveys modernisation as a relational action. If party A introduces a system, party B will follow. However, this representation alone leaves it open who initiated the modernisation and whether it counts as an action or reaction.

Icons and symbols are widely used in technical images as a visual shortcut. As a symbol, it represents an object, concept, or action. Icons are often simplified, stylised, and easily recognisable, effectively conveying meaning quickly and efficiently. Icons can represent a wide range of concepts,

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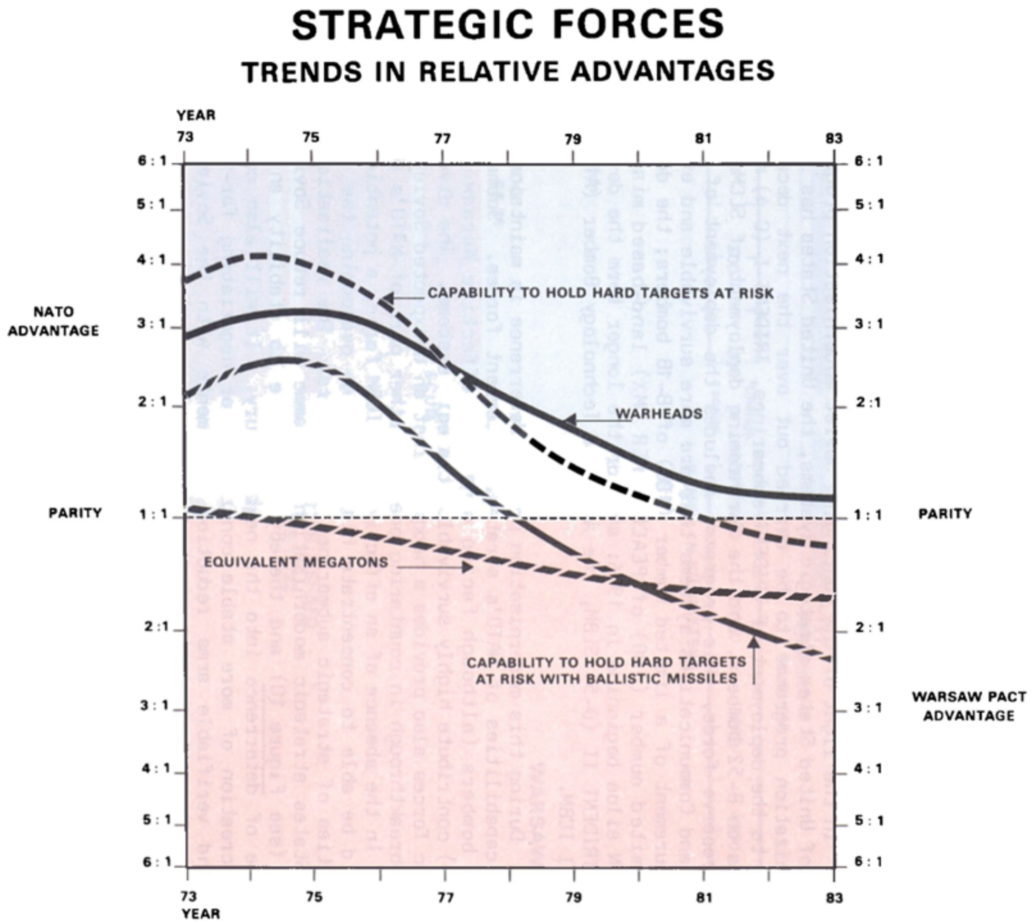

Figure 2. Strategic forces: Trends in relative advantages (NATO Information Service 1984); creator: unknown.

from everyday objects such as a phone or a car to more abstract concepts such as an idea or a feeling as emojis.

In the 1980s, conventional icons for military objects were used in the booklets. As Figure 4 shows, each missile type is represented by a specific icon that differs in size. Visually, it may remind us of both a bar chart and phallic symbols. In addition, a table complements the figure, listing categories and numbers. The ratio between the icon of the Pershing II (10.61 m) and icon of the SS-20 (16.5 m) looks accurate.

A *map* is a visual representation of an area or a region that typically shows the location of geographic features such as rivers, mountains, cities, and roads. Maps can take many forms, including topographic, political, road, and thematic maps. Figures 5 and 6 show a map of states in Europe, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The view is the typical bird's-eye perspective, which creates an artificial overview. The picture's centre is Moscow. On the left side – or in the West – the map shows the 'Atlantic Ocean' with 'Greenland', 'Portugal', 'Mauretania', and non-indicated parts of Western Sahara and Canada. In the East – on the right side – the map closes with parts of 'China', 'Nepal', and 'India'. In the North, the map finishes with parts of Canada, 'Greenland', the 'Soviet Union', and 'China', in the South it is bounded by 'Mauretania', 'Mali', 'Algeria', 'Libya', 'Egypt', the 'Red Sea', 'Saudi Arabia', and the 'Arabian Sea'.

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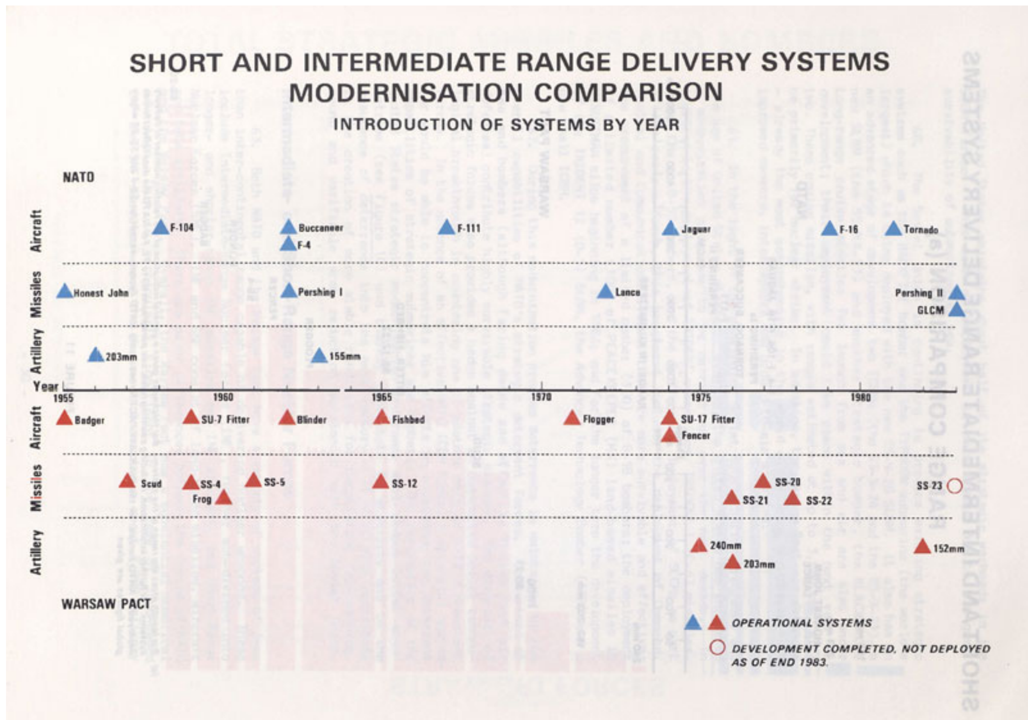

Figure 3. Short- and intermediate-range delivery systems modernisation comparison (by year) (NATO Information Service, 1984); creator: unknown.

The representation of territorial size and shape is non-accurate (based on the conventional representation of the Mercator map) but compressed. The names used to indicate the states are shortcuts instead of official and legal titles. The state borders organise the surface of the image. Three icons of an upright missile, three lines linking these missiles and locations in the South-West, and three light red-coloured bows overlapping with Greenland, Western Europe, North-East Africa, the Mediterranean, and Central Asia have been added to the conventional state map.

Conventional geopolitical images of state borders, territorial entities, and seas inform the map. It's simple and flat. It's structured by lines, contours, four colours, and the three icons of a missile. It comprises two layers: the layer of states and the layer of missile coverage implying ranges. The representational mode creates relations of entanglement based on a shared space. It distances and connects entities at the same time. Cartography is both a medium and a technology to produce spatial knowledge fortified with political meaning.

The combination of a geopolitical layer of state representation and a military-strategic-tactical layer of missile deployment and range illustrates the complexity of the issue at hand. The technical image of the figure with simplified icons, bows, and lines disciplines such complexity. It makes SS-20 bases detectable and thus governable – in principle. However, it also makes visible some contradictions. As shown, SS-20 missiles could reach not only the territory of NATO member states but Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Tunisia as well. The figure extends the SS-20 'threat' beyond the political boundaries of NATO. It implies that 'we (the states) are all affected'. The fact that missiles could be launched east or north instead of west is not depicted.

Figure 6 represents NATO's 'defence line' with the coverage of GLCM (BGM-109 G Ground Launched Cruise Missile) and Pershing II missiles. It visualises that the Russian capital, Moscow, lies within the scope and can be reached by GLCMs. These maps illustrate the European-centred

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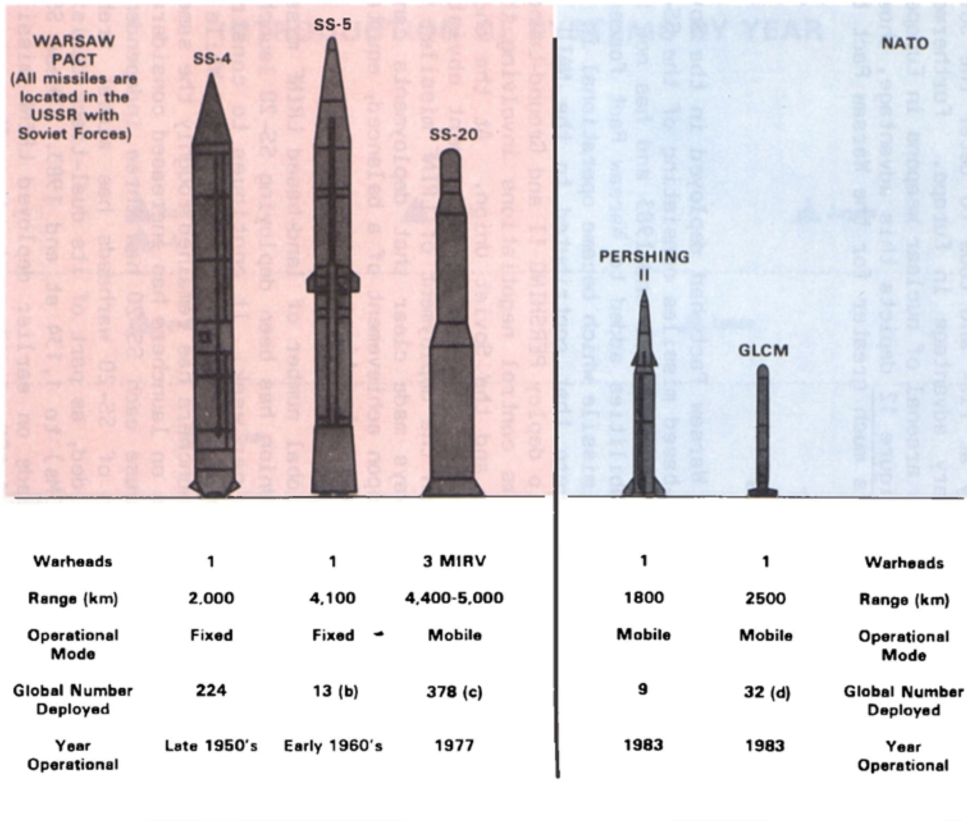
LONGER-RANGE INF MISSILE SYSTEMS DEPLOYED END 1983 (a)



	SS-4	SS-5	SS-20	PERSHING II	GLCM	
Warheads	1	1	3 MIRV	1	1	Warheads
Range (km)	2,000	4,100	4,400-5,000	1800	2500	Range (km)
Operational Mode	Fixed	Fixed	Mobile	Mobile	Mobile	Operational Mode
Global Number Deployed	224	13 (b)	378 (c)	9	32 (d)	Global Number Deployed
Year Operational	Late 1950's	Early 1960's	1977	1983	1983	Year Operational

(a) This table is prepared on the basis of missiles on launchers.
(b) By end 83 all SS-5 missiles were being retired.
(c) Excludes refire missiles.
(d) Not all of the 32 GLCMs had reached initial operational capability at end 1983.

Figure 4. Longer-range UNF missile systems deployed end 1983 (NATO Information Service, 1984); creator: unknown.

perspective of military balance. Only two maps illustrate more than the broader European theatre of military confrontation (Figure 1 and Figure 18 in the booklet).

Seen together, Figures 5 and 6 represent the relational side of mutual vulnerability. Because visibilities are as important as invisibilities, the authors of the booklet did not design one image that blends the coverage of NATO and Warsaw Pact missiles, did not mark the 'iron curtain' as a dividing line in Europe, and did not indicate alliance membership, which is only represented in Figure 20, the last of the booklet.

Overall, the aesthetics representing NATO's military capabilities are based on objectifying segments. On the one hand, these imaginaries intertextually and inter-visually quote scientific ways of visualisation. On the other hand, the implied conclusion to be drawn is highly political, representing a military imbalance between NATO and the Warsaw Pact within the context of mutual vulnerability. Due to the technicalities of the aesthetic and the political work done by it, anxieties are controlled to support controversial political projects. While force comparison is represented as

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Figure 5. SS-20 bases (NATO Information Service, 1984); creator: unknown.

Figure 6. NATO defence line (NATO Information Service, 1984); creator: unknown.

technical and objective, the visuals reveal the highly political nature of any representation. Using science aesthetics, the booklet aptly shows how actors operate with specific visual types to represent spaces and objects while leaving the affected people out of sight.

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The overall geopolitical imaginary of the booklet represents a 'way of looking' that is 'highly visual'.[58] It creates a 'particular understanding of places, communities and accompanying identities'.[59] Technical images make capabilities visible through an aesthetic of spatial divisions and relational objects. They intend to objectify and naturalise instead of mobilising strong feelings. A stable sense of self is created by managing the ambivalent anxieties associated with military force and by rendering populations and people invisible.

While bar diagrams and maps are still popular, new modes of digital imaginaries, like tweets, memes, or catchy videos on YouTube, emerged and are defining digital communication nowadays. Booklets are mainly gone, but visual representations of force and alliance policies prevail, as the second vignette illustrates. In addition, NATO has changed too, representing an organisation of collective defence, collective security, and cooperative security.[60]

Vignette 2021: The social media video '#NATO2030'

Contextualisation in the wider political discourse: NATO's strategic concepts over time

Across a history that has spanned 75 years, NATO has adopted seven major strategic concepts. Revising its strategy is a moment of self-assurance for the alliance. NATO's current Strategic Concept was adopted in 2022 and replaced the 2010 version. The latter had been heavily influenced by the experience of 9/11 and the priority accorded in NATO (largely at American prompting) to out-of-area missions, counterterrorism, and counter-insurgency. Expert and official opinion increasingly viewed the document as ill suited to great power rivalry (evidenced in the rise of China and the hostile behaviour of Russia) and the proliferation of new threats, whether in cyberspace or driven by climate change.[61] In December 2019, the NATO allies mandated an independent Reflection Group composed of 10 'leading personalities', which was chaired by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.[62] The group was tasked with formulating recommendations on improving unity and consultation among the allies and enhancing NATO's political role. In March 2020, this process was branded 'NATO 2030', and the expert report was published in December 2020 (Reflection Group 2020). While the report reaffirmed that NATO had been the most successful alliance in history, its authors claimed that it needed to adapt once again. The authors saw strong evidence of great power rivalry and geopolitical competition. Russia was still perceived as the main military threat, but China, it was suggested, could change the 'strategic calculus of the Alliance'.

In parallel with the report's publication, NATO launched support campaigns across all major social media platforms. On its YouTube channel, a short video (1:02 minutes) was posted on 7 June 2021, reiterating the hashtag #NATO2030. At the time of writing (13 November 2023), the video has received 10,659 views, 365 likes, 12 public comments, and no dislikes.

NATO's social media activities are manifold, including all major platforms (except TikTok) and products like videos, cartoons, and interviews. The YouTube video about NATO's revised strategic concept showcases its digital public diplomacy and strategic communication. First, debates about NATO's strategy represent a focal point for its sense of self, and the potential shifts and continuities as strategic debates are meant to clarify aims and policies for the future. Second, this video illustrates how different modes of communication – e.g. the visual, the textual, and the audible – intersect. Finally, as the video was produced and authorised by NATO itself, it illustrates how the Alliance is shaping its self-image. Looking at this video, we can see a logic of self-legitimation that

[58] Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.

[59] Ibid., p. 5.

[60] Trine Flockhart, *Cooperative Security: NATO's Partnership Policy in a Changing World* (DIIS Report, 2014). As scholars and politicians frequently argue, one of NATO's remarkable successes has been its ability to adapt to internal and external changes while upholding core narratives of collective defence, solidarity, and a value community.

[61] Moller and Rynning, 'Revitalizing transatlantic relations'; Thierry Tardy, 'NATO 2030. United for a new era: A digest', NDC Policy Brief, no. 23 (2020).

[62] Tardy, 'NATO 2030'.

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aims at the support of the public and governments of allies alike.[63] It shows the deeply inscribed self-identity of NATO as a military, political, and cultural alliance that is adaptive to its environment and fit to uphold the security of its member countries and their populations.

It goes without saying that studying one booklet or video does not fully explore NATO's ontological security discourse. However, zooming in on media products does provide a glimpse of how unity is created, how difference is made invisible, and how a stable sense of self is reproduced. A video is a highly complex, sensory, and performative medium. Reading, seeing, and hearing are culturally shaped practices. Text, image, and sound create meaning and 'make us feel, both as individuals and collectives'.[64] The key modalities of the NATO video are words, images, and music. The footage is mostly photographic, some images are redesigned, and the cinematography applies typical film aesthetics. Only the last sequence is based on the campaign's graphic design, with the symbol of NATO in combination with 2030 in blue and white coloured prism-like camouflage. The video does not include credits or further information on the footage. It goes without saying that the selection of images, the wording, and the sound are motivated by political and aesthetic choices. As a professional branding and advertisement product, the video merges codes and conventions from advertising and marketing with political symbolism.

The social media video

The NATO 2030 video provides a simple message that is converted to the audience in short phrases written in capital letters in white, and only four times transparent with white-coloured contours. The phrases appear and disappear with images, creating a textual-visual storyline. The beat and rhythm of the music also shape the textual-visual association and its pace. The poetic text can be divided into four verses.

> WE ARE – ALMOST ONE BILLION CITIZENS – 30 ALLIES – ONE FOR ALL – AND ALL FOR ONE

Verse 1 iterates NATO's foundational identity narrative of mutual defence and solidarity. Article 5 is often described as the Alliance's cornerstone, distinguishing it from other organisations. However, the collective mentioned here is not the allied governments as the formal contracting parties, but rather 'we, the citizens'. Hence, NATO is seen as an alliance of people, not (only) states. While the description of NATO as an 'alliance of democracies' has featured prominently in politics and academia,[65] critics emphasise the constructed nature of this democratic self-image.[66] All allies are formally democracies, but neither the structures nor the policies of NATO are controlled democratically. People do not directly vote for representatives, for example.

> A POLITICAL ALLIANCE – A MILITARY ALLIANCE – WITH A GLOBAL APPROACH – TACKLING TODAY'S CHALLENGES – AND TOMORROW'S

With verse 2, NATO's foundational narrative continues and shows its widening over time. Given its treaty and institutional structure, NATO has been about political and military cooperation from its

[63] Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'IO public communication going digital? Understanding social media adoption and use in times of politicization', in Corneliu Bjola and Ruben Zaiotti (eds), *Digital Diplomacy and International Organisations, Autonomy, Legitimacy and Contestation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 21–51 (p. 387).

[64] Callahan, *Sensible Politics*, p. 2.

[65] Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies: The European Influence on US Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1995); Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[66] Bradley S. Klein, 'How the West was one: Representational politics of Nato', *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), pp. 311–25; Williams and Neumann, 'From alliance to security community: NATO, Russia, and the power of identity'; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Defending the West: Occidentalism and the formation of NATO', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 11:3 (2003), pp. 223–52.

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beginning.[67] By definition, the membership of the Alliance is limited to the North Atlantic area. But since the early 1990s, the Alliance has identified global threats ranging from terrorism and climate change to great power rivalry and thus has constantly extended its global ambitions through out-of-area missions and its partnership programmes.[68] The picture supporting this position shows Stoltenberg welcoming the prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. The verse refers to challenges, highlighting a story of success where challenges are met and overcome. Again, NATO's transformation towards cooperative security and its ability to adapt to a changing environment are articulated. The supplementary images show forces, not in combat but in situations of medical support and logistics and symbolically zooming in on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

KEEPING US SAFE – ON LAND – AT SEA – IN THE AIR – IN CYBER – AND IN SPACE

In verse 3, neither defence nor security but rather safety is presented as the aim of NATO. Like challenges, 'safe' sounds less militaristic and more appealing to a civilian audience. The scope – or theatre – of activities is divided between land, sea, and air as the traditional force types and accomplished by cyber and space. While the alliance has addressed cyber-defence since 2016, space security only recently moved on the agenda of NATO in 2019.[69]

NATO IS OUR PAST – OUR PRESENT – OUR FUTURE – #NATO2030

The fourth and final verse returns to the motif of a perpetual community represented by NATO and directly engages with the spectator through the possessive pronoun 'ours'. It leaves no doubt that the Alliance belongs to 'us' and has been, is, and always will be alive. The 'we' referred to throughout the video is not explicitly signified. A spectator most likely assumes that 'us' symbolises the citizens of NATO member states. However, one could also read it as an imagined universal 'us', potentially including all who feel addressed and attached.

The footage of the video is photographic. The symbolism and generic nature of most pictures is high and close-ups of individuals feature prominently. The images are decontextualised, as no credits that explain the original source are provided. The symbol of NATO, the compass, is edited into each shot in the upper-right corner. The graphic design of the letters changes four times, inverting the colour scheme (transparent letters with white contour) for 'a military alliance – at sea – in cyber – our present'.

The opening sequence 1 (see Supplementary Materials, Appendix Part II) introduces a firework, certainly a celebration. The next sequence 2 is about symbolic monuments representing a series of allies: the Charles Bridge in Prague, the Tower Bridge in London, Berlin Cathedral, the Statue of Liberty in New York, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris. With the introduction of '30 Allies – one for all – and all for one', images of young people fraternising, citizens walking through the streets, and a partying mass follow (Figure 7, sequence 3).

Then, the video shows four close-ups by reducing the distance from shot to shot: a female soldier in camouflage, a female in civilian clothing, a male soldier in uniform, and a male with a then-closing visor of a flight helmet (sequence 4). The following sequence 5 introduces the spectator to the various activities of the Alliance under the headline of 'a political alliance – a military alliance – with a global approach – tackling today's challenges – and tomorrow's'. Stoltenberg is welcoming and hugging political leaders, military forces are marching through water and sand, airplanes extinguish fire, soldiers provide medical supplies and deliver relief packages. In this sequence, individual soldiers (female and male) are represented as well as the NATO staff and representatives in a group

[67] Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Jackson, 'Defending the West'.

[68] As of September 2024, NATO partnerships include the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, global partnerships (e.g. New Zealand), and partnerships with international organisations (UN, EU, and OSCE).

[69] Jeppe T. Jacobsen, 'Cyber offense in NATO: Challenges and opportunities', *International Affairs*, 97:3 (2021), pp. 703–20.

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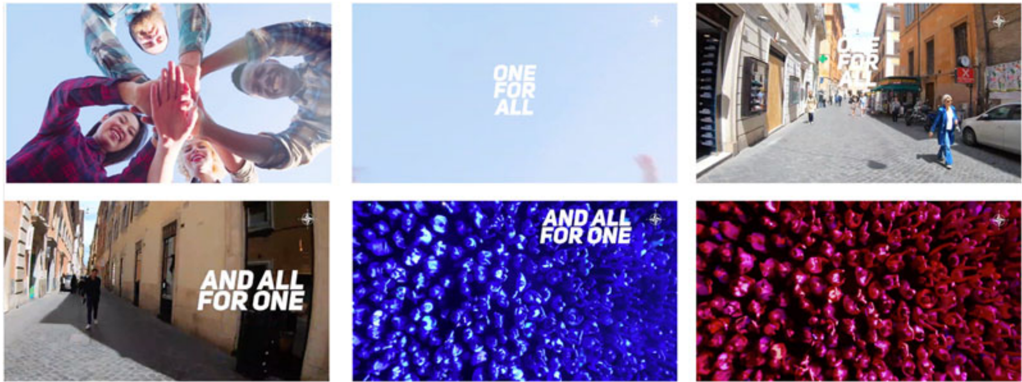

Figure 7. Sequence 3.

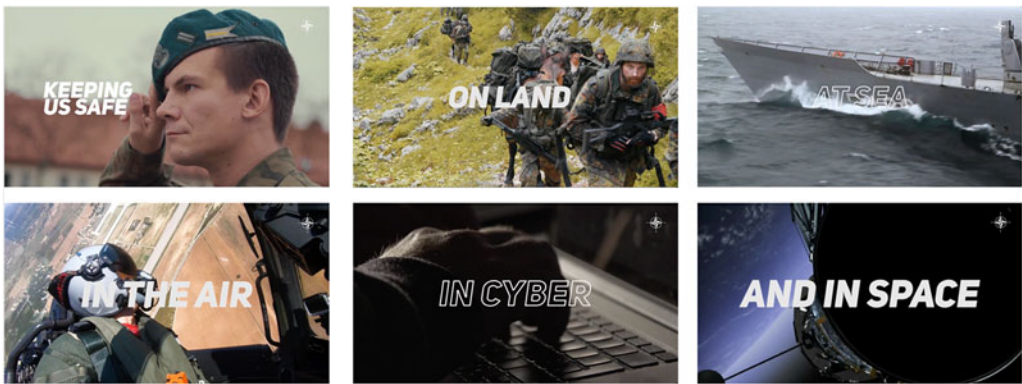

Figure 8. Sequence 6.

performance. ‘Tomorrow’s challenges’ are symbolised by a redesigned picture where a networked globe appears in a human’s eye. The sequence includes individuals and groups, known political leaders and unknown individuals, women, and a soldier of colour with a Sikh turban. Sequence 6 (Figure 8) continues with the aim and spatial scope of NATO’s activities, ‘keeping us safe – on land – at sea – in the air – in cyber – and in space’. The history and temporal scope of the Alliance is the primary motif of sequence 7 with ‘NATO is our past – our present – our future’. The spectator sees historical footage from the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, a female waving, a welcoming scene where two males hug a female and children, and soldiers working together in different situations and locations. The last shot of this sequence zooms in on shaking hands between two humans in camouflage. The final sequence 8 shows a female soldier with protection glasses in camouflage in a close-up of her side profile looking right or East. The sun is setting behind her, the #NATO2030 emerges, a circle zooms in, and the final image of NATO’s symbol on a blue background with the addition 2030 appears.

The video uses music that was specially produced for it. It’s a catchy digital sound of keyboards, drums, percussions, and violins, starting slow, speeding up, and returning to the key theme. The music pauses for a moment at ‘and for all’ based on a scene of a dancing anonymous mass in blue, then pink neon light at a club, seen from above. The melody is repetitive and has a straight 4/4 rhythm. The rhythm contributes to the sensory experience of the video and creates a flow by overlaying the cuts between the images. The melody and rhythm are intended to

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evoke an interest in watching the video until the end. The beat, in combination with the straightforward cutting-and-editing style and the short slogans, supports attention and engagement.[70] As a multimodal product, the video blends different modalities, contributing to the experience and potential understanding of NATO's key objectives. At least for me, the combined aesthetics create an image of agility and desirability that moves NATO beyond the one-dimensional role of a defence alliance.[71]

The look of NATO in 1984 and 2021: A comparison

From absent people to a gender-equalising and pluralist alliance

The 1984 booklet establishes a traditional geopolitical look at objectified forces and naturalised territories where neither people nor gendered bodies play a significant role.[72] However, scholars have argued that exactly such representations of military force are embedded in a highly masculinised discourse where weapons turn into objects of (sexual) desire.[73] Compared to the technical images, the YouTube video is extremely sensitive to gender roles and representations of diversity. Of the 10 portrait images, 6 show women, and 5 are signified as soldiers. Various recent publications show that gendered narratives are essential to NATO's public diplomacy and its effort to shape the alliance's identity.[74] While a masculinist protection logic is deeply inscribed in NATO's contractual designs and institutional set-up, it is mainly the vignette from 1984 that resonates with the invisibility of gender, gender inequalities, and injustice.[75] The YouTube video uses a more playful, yet polysemic approach. On the one hand, the masculinist protection logic is reiterated in the video by referring to the pledge 'one for all, and all for one', the effort of 'keeping us safe', and the scenery of family reunions where men welcome their wives and children. We can also see a feminised protection logic at play when soldiers are providing medical support and delivering aid packages. On the other hand, popular stereotypes and clichés are low besides the heteronormativity represented by the image of the (reunited) family. The carefulness of selecting frames that represent diversity makes visible the underlying gender sensibilities. Gender roles are partly fixed in the video as a combination of male/female on the one hand and civilian/military on the other hand. NATO is shown as a gender-equalising institution by camouflaging representations of its masculine identity and military policies. Realties, however, look more nuanced. NATO member state forces have a share of 12 per cent female soldiers. Hungary leads with 20 per cent women, while Turkey, Albania, and Greece restrict the access of women to serving in the army (NATO 2019).

From geopolitical deterrence to a perpetual and affective community of people, not only states

As a manifestation of the 'special bond' between North Americans and Europeans, NATO is often regarded as a unique normative community. By this view, it is a security community where war between its members has become unthinkable.[76] Nevertheless, the affective relation between allies, or even 'friends',[77] requires constant investment. Looking back at the 1980s, geopolitical divisions

[70] While IR scholarship already looks into the political side of music, sound itself seem to be more difficult to explore. Marianne I. Franklin (ed.), *Resounding International Relations: On Music, Culture, and Politics* (Springer, 2005).

[71] Kuus, '"Love, peace and Nato"'.

[72] I especially thank the reviewer for highlighting the significance of gender for both vignettes.

[73] Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals'.

[74] Katharine Wright, Matthew Hurley, and Jesus Ignacio Gil Ruiz, *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within* (Routledge, 2019); Wright and Rosamond, 'NATO's strategic narratives'; Matthew Hurley, 'Watermelons and weddings: Making women, peace and security "relevant" at NATO through (re)telling stories of success', *Global Society*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 436–56.

[75] Iris Marion Young, 'The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25.

[76] Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies*.

[77] Felix Berenskoetter, 'Friends, there are no friends? An intimate reframing of the international', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 647–76.

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and anxieties following from a represented imbalance of forces define the common fate of the member states. It's a community of states, symbolised by the maps, that rationally calculates its combined military capabilities. The representation of equipment is also prominent in the YouTube video. While a classical deterrence-requires-capabilities narrative is aesthetically invoked in 1984, a narrative of technological modernism informs the second vignette when jets, ships, and geared-up soldiers are shown in action.

While the 1984 booklet envisions the alliance around the core of mutual defence and deterrence, the #NATO2030 video renews NATO's foundational narrative and twists it. The collective 'we' and 'us' mentioned refers to both the allies, symbolised by iconic monuments of tourist attractions, and their citizens. Love, friendship, and empathy instead of fear and anger are shown as the driving forces of this community. The political, military, and cultural service of the military and civilian personnel to the community is essential as cooperation, teamwork, and assistance characterise the activities shown. NATO's self-image as a community of people and states is stable, even perpetual ('our past – present – and future'). Various scholars have recently emphasised the community-building nature of emotions.[78] Such affective relations between individuals, groups, and states are not naturally given but socially constructed. The performative and bodily nature of emotions is symbolised in the video by hugs and handshakes. These representations are intended to produce a sentimental relation among strangers by establishing the myth of a perpetual community of people, not only states. Aggressive and militaristic practices (e.g. combat, counter-insurgency, drone warfare) and human death are silenced as unwanted representations of NATO.

Looking at NATO in 1984 and 2021 shows how an episteme informed by capabilities, deterrence, geopolitical divisions, and absent people gave way to a more human-faced and pluralistic self-representation.[79] Such a representational shift aligns with ontological discourses on physical security, mutual destruction, and non-violent coexistence during the Cold War, and NATO's new mission and response to various military and non-military challenges and risks since the end of the Cold War.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored how NATO's visual public diplomacy shapes a stable sense of self, thus contributing to the alliance's ontological security. During the 1980s, technical images represented a popular mode to rationalise deterrence and mutual defence in NATO publications. Looking at NATO, then, was based on charts and diagrams that visualised weapon systems as sociotechnical machinery of deterrence and defence. Today, image campaigns represent NATO as a technologically modern, human-centred alliance run by devoted people, and acting for the people.

While the empirical data was limited to only two vignettes from 1984 and 2021, I want to make the case that the preliminary findings support a broader research agenda. As public diplomacy 'is designed to bring about understanding for an actor's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies',[80] the presented campaigns provide an ideal starting point to explore NATO's self-constructions of power, identity, and security in depth, in comparison, and over time. Further research could provide a more coherent visual genealogy of NATO, zooming in on visual technologies, strategic narratives, and identity formation.

In conclusion, I want to highlight three themes for such an agenda at the intersection of visual international relations and public diplomacy: (1) the entanglement of words, images, and emotions; (2) the perception of public diplomacy and strategic communication regionally and globally;

[78]Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Simon Koschut, 'The power of (emotion) words: On the importance of emotions for social constructivist discourse analysis in IR', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21 (2018), pp. 495–522.

[79]I especially thank the reviewer for pointing out this shift more clearly than I had done in a previous version.

[80]Gilboa, *A Research Agenda for Public Diplomacy*, p. 3.

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and (3) the impact of the Russian–Ukrainian war and Russia's hybrid warfare on NATO's public diplomacy and strategic communication.

Public diplomacy activities, then and now, exemplify the entanglement of words, images, and emotions. In consequence, empirical studies should zoom in and show how words inform images, and vice versa, and how both intersect with emotions. In addition, we can assume that such assemblages of text–image–affect contribute to the formation, fixation, and change of identity constructions. Koschut, for example, argues that norms regarding appropriate emotional reactions stabilised NATO as a security community during inter-alliance crises.[81] How do visibilities, images, and strategic narratives shape such emotion norms? In addition, studies suggest that the emotional potential of visual modes differs. As NATO's force report of 1984 illustrates, technical images are frequently used to rationalise and objectify contested (political) decisions. A catchy YouTube video or a graphic novel commissioned by NATO looks and feels different, as it mobilises a repertoire of emotions closer to entertainment and marketing.[82] What emotion norms are inserted in different images, and how do audiences respond to such diverse visual modes of meaning-making?

While NATO constantly invests in its public image, curating a variety of social media platforms and sponsoring public events, there is not much data showing how effective the alliance is in reaching its objectives.[83] How do different audiences, for example, depending on age and gender, perceive NATO campaigns? Are there any differences at the national, regional, or global scale? Addressing these questions is not only relevant for content creators but may better show why publics identify with some narratives and visuals while other public diplomacy activities go down.

Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine calls for a reassessment of public diplomacy in general, and of alliance policies and objectives in particular.[84] Much has changed since the #NATO2030 video aired: Sweden and Finland are now full members of the alliance, and NATO's military presence at the 'eastern flank' has been strengthened. In addition, NATO staff are busy countering online disinformation, deep fakes, and propaganda on the one hand and actively shaping an image of a peaceful yet diligent and resilient alliance on the other hand. In a recent contribution, Beaumont, Wilhelmsen, and Lundby Gjerde identify three changes in NATO's self-narrative since 2014: a revitalisation of 'NATO's hitherto fading identity as a regional collective defence organization', an emphasis on hybrid threats, calling for societal resilience, and a prioritisation of countering disinformation to imagine NATO as a 'purveyor of "truth and facts"'.[85] Looking back and forth at the Alliance's public diplomacy activities and strategic communication may contribute to a better understanding of its aesthetic investment in a stable sense of self and self-assurance in times of change. Who NATO wants to be *or become* is again on the political agenda.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.56.

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[81] Simon Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities: The significance of emotion norms in inter-allied conflict management', *Review of International Studies*, 40:3 (2014), pp. 533–58.

[82] In 2022, NATO launched a graphic novel contest under the headline #ProtectTheFuture. The primary audience for this campaign are minors and adolescents. Available at: {https://www.nato.int/protect-the-future/}.

[83] Olivier Schmitt, 'When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:4 (2018), pp. 487–511.

[84] Kaneva, Dolea, and Manor, 'Public diplomacy and nation branding in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine War'.

[85] Paul David Beaumont, Julie Wilhelmsen, and Kristian Lundby Gjerde, 'Reimagining NATO after Crimea: Defender of the rule-based order and truth?', *Contemporary Security Policy* (2024), pp. 1–30 (p. 399).

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