

# DEFENSE DOSSIER

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A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR ECONOMIC STATECRAFT

*Manisha Singh*

ADAPTING OUTREACH TO CHANGING GEOPOLITICS

*S. Enders Wimbush*

THE KEYS TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

*Robert A. Schadler*

REFORMING THE BUREAUCRACY OF INFLUENCE

*James S. Robbins*

TOWARD A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY FOR THE 21ST  
CENTURY

*Ilan Berman*



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

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OCTOBER 2021 | ISSUE 31

- 1. From the Editors** 2  
Ilan Berman and Richard M. Harrison
- 2. A Pivotal Moment for Economic Statecraft** 3  
*America's economic might is compelling. It needs to be marshaled against 21st century challenges.*  
Manisha Singh
- 3. Adapting Outreach to Changing Geopolitics** 7  
*New global trends require new thinking about how to spread American ideas.*  
S. Enders Wimbush
- 4. The Keys to Effective Public Diplomacy** 11  
*Public diplomacy is miles apart from traditional diplomacy. The key to success is understanding the difference.*  
Robert A. Schadler
- 5. Reforming the Bureaucracy of Influence** 14  
*If they are to be effective, the institutions that communicate U.S. values need to be changed—and upgraded.*  
James S. Robbins
- 6. Toward a Public Diplomacy Strategy for the 21st Century** 17  
*The international media terrain has changed dramatically. American outreach needs to adapt along with it.*  
Ilan Berman



## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the October 2021 edition of the American Foreign Policy Council's *Defense Dossier* e-journal.

In this edition of the Dossier, we focus on American “soft power”—specifically, on the tools by which the United States can shape or influence global opinion. Today, those mechanisms (in particular, economic statecraft and public diplomacy) require significant upgrades in order to be competitive in a new, and increasingly hostile, international environment. In the pages that follow, we discuss the challenges the U.S. faces in the information space, including the need for structural reform of its public diplomacy bureaucracy and the requirements for a robust and coordinated strategic communications initiative. The mission could not be more urgent. In order for the U.S. to effectively counter the disinformation emanating from Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and assorted non-state actors, it will need to upgrade its global messaging—as well as the infrastructure that transmits it. Only time will tell whether Washington is up to the challenge.

Sincerely,

Ilan Berman  
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison  
Managing Editor



# A Pivotal Moment for Economic Statecraft

*Manisha Singh*

**A**t any moment in history, the use of economic measures to impact desired outcomes has been fundamental to American foreign policy. Today, it has become indispensable to it. As the United States navigates a new and challenging world order, the transformational potential of American economic power represents an essential lever of influence for policymakers in Washington. It is an area which will need to be harnessed more effectively than ever in order to meet an array of immediate, pressing issues.

## THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY

Actions such as the imposition of penalties in the form of sanctions or the positive relationships created through trade have been a central tenet in the formation of our republic. Both types of actions fostered national security even before the United States became a country. The establishment of diplomatic relations with other nations went hand in hand with the formation of trading relationships. The parameters which evolved to govern commerce between nations ultimately formed essential parts of strategic bilateral relationships.

In the 20th century, economic statecraft gained unprecedented momentum in the post-war era. The reconstruction of economic stability led to the creation of an international economic architecture to define relations among nations, underpinned by the understanding that without the ability to produce or secure goods, neither conflict nor the advancement of societies could occur.

As the post-World War institutional architecture developed, there was a recognition that economic tools

could play a heightened role in the prevention of armed conflict. In addition to placing an emphasis on territorial integrity, President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech<sup>1</sup> laid the groundwork for institutions to come, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which became the WTO, and the League of Nations, which became the United Nations. Today's global institutions took their present form largely after World War II, but the trendline was by then well-established. Nearly every international institution has a direct or at least tangential impact on the global marketplace. The implementation of American foreign policy, thus, began to require a more expansive focus to cover not only bilateral economic relationships, but also engagement in these new multilateral institutions. And inexorably, the proliferation of global economic institutions transformed economic statecraft into a tool of U.S. influence and American public diplomacy—and prompted the creation of a federal bureaucracy to carry forward this mission.

At present, that bureaucracy encompasses a dedicated Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs at the Department of State with more than 200 economic officers in Washington DC and almost 3,000 economic officers posted at embassies and consulates around the world. Its mission is one of “diplomatic gardening” in host countries, where relationships are strengthened and maintained, but also advocacy for U.S. companies and the issues which affect them. This latter task is a very specific form of public diplomacy which often has the most tangible connection to the American people.

## PRESSING PRIORITIES

In order to be effective, economic statecraft needs to be guided by a number of key priorities.



**“The proliferation of global economic institutions transformed economic statecraft into a tool of U.S. influence and American public diplomacy—and prompted the creation of a federal bureaucracy to carry forward this mission.”**

The first is a balance between economic engagement abroad and its domestic effects. Deployed effectively, economic statecraft can be instrumental. But when used without sufficient attention to the consequences for the domestic economy, it can exacerbate the apprehension the domestic population feels about a globalized economy.

This dynamic is often not sufficiently appreciated because, like the State Department itself, economic diplomacy has historically been outward facing. Its aim is to achieve progress with foreign interlocutors, even if the stated policy is to benefit the American economy. Yet if economic diplomacy does not sufficiently prioritize domestic effects, the results can create significant conflict.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the global trade pact which was soundly rejected by a vast majority of the American people. Economic diplomacy has been forced to adjust as a result. The Trump administration made one of the key pillars of its *National Security Strategy* a consideration of the effects of multilateral trade and trade agreements on the American worker. Such a shift in perspective requires economic diplomats to better understand the effects of globalization on domestic workers and industries.

Second, and related, is the need for stronger advocacy on behalf of American business. American diplomats have always played a role in promoting U.S. business overseas, through both direct and indirect channels.

In recent years, however, there have been efforts to emphasize the diplomatic role and business impacts on national security still further. For instance, Congress specifically recognized the effect of economic matters on national security through the 2019 *Championing American Business Diplomacy Act*. This legislation reinforced existing lines of effort in public economic diplomacy and provided for new initiatives—chief among them a public-private partnership to further economic diplomacy. The Act embraces the realization that government should consult with and understand the private sector in order to be an effective advocate for American economic interests overseas. It also broadens the scope

of commercial advocacy undertaken by the State Department. Although primarily housed within the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, most bureaus in the building play some role in promoting American business. Each regional bureau with oversight of U.S. missions overseas now must ensure that commercial diplomacy is an operational goal.

This focus is undergirded by a clear realization. The American brand is one of our best ambassadors abroad. When popular American logos are recognized by citizens overseas, there is a positive national association—one that can help facilitate public relations, particularly in countries where there is little knowledge about the United States. Conversely, if there are corporate actors engaging in reckless behavior, they can make it harder for diplomats to engage constructively. The diplomatic partnership with the private sector is, therefore, an essential component of America’s overall public diplomacy profile.

The third priority is the need to combat economic aggression by adversaries and competitor nations. At present, the most critical premise in economic statecraft is challenging economic aggression by other nations, primarily China. For decades, our economic diplomacy surrounding China has been centered around dialogue with the PRC that sought to ensure its adherence to the global rules of trade. Yet this dialogue has not only failed to produce results, it has emboldened the PRC to continue to flout the global rules of trade and engage in





unprecedented economic espionage. It was dangerous enough when the economic threat from China involved theft of intellectual property compromising commerce and consumer technology.<sup>2</sup> At present, however, the threat has escalated to the point where American military intelligence and national security are compromised. We have entered a zone where high-powered economic warfare is being waged against the institutions which comprise our national sovereignty. The threat to basic goods and services as well as technology has been steadily increasing.

As yet, economic statecraft has not been sufficiently reconfigured to address this threat. It needs to be. China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) has global dominance as its centerpiece, and countering it requires the United States to marshal its economic power in addition to political and military might.

In the last Administration, there was a definitive plan to counter the BRI economically and strategically. A central pillar of its *National Security Strategy* was the maxim that economic security represents an integral part of national security. The Biden administration needs to likewise invest in economic statecraft as a means to counter the strategic threat emanating from the PRC. Such an approach will not only provide the needed counterweight to Chinese imperialism, but also contain the global consequences of its premier foreign policy project.

These and other challenges make it abundantly clear that the complexities of today's world require America harness economic statecraft in a more comprehensive and compelling way in order to safeguard its strategic interests.

## WHAT NEXT FOR ECONOMIC STATECRAFT?

Today, the United States confronts challenges in global affairs that require us to sharpen our tools of economic statecraft in their various forms.

Afghanistan provides a case in point. Trillions of dollars have been spent over the past two decades only to see the country revert back to its original state. Bilateral foreign assistance and funding from international financial institutions is being halted, and the global community is now debating whether and how to engage with the Taliban. China, meanwhile, has already made its determination. The PRC has left no doubt that it will be making Afghanistan a central focus of its BRI and is already buying its way in, targeting strategic assets located in Afghanistan, including billions of dollars in valuable mineral deposits.<sup>3</sup> There are also reports that the PRC is plotting to take over Bagram airbase.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the looming civil strife within Afghanistan, this threat from the PRC will directly impact the ability of the U.S. to play a constructive role there and in the wider region.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> President Woodrow Wilson, Address to Congress, January 8, 1918, [https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~wggray/Teaching/His300/Handouts/Fourteen\\_Points.pdf](https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~wggray/Teaching/His300/Handouts/Fourteen_Points.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative estimated that “Chinese theft of American IP currently costs between \$225 billion and \$600 billion annually.” As cited in Sherisse Pham, “How much has the US lost from China’s IP theft?” *CNN Business*, March 23, 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/03/23/technology/china-us-trump-tariffs-ip-theft/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Marlow and Enda Curran, “China Eyes Afghanistan’s \$1 Trillion Worth of Minerals with a Risky Bet on Taliban,” *Bloomberg*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-24/china-s-eyes-1-trillion-of-minerals-with-risky-bet-on-taliban>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Shinkman, “China Weighing Occupation of Former U.S. Air Base at Bagram,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-09-07/china-weighing-occupation-of-former-us-air-base-at-bagram-sources>.





# Adapting Outreach to Changing Geopolitics

*S. Enders Wimbush*

Public diplomacy—a government’s effort to support strategies advancing interests by communicating directly with the population of an adversary or ally to shape that state’s public opinion—is an increasingly powerful and ubiquitous instrument in the diplomatic toolkits of many nations. Its intersection with geopolitics is organic, in that by its nature, public diplomacy is intended and designed to influence its targets to support ideas, policies, programs, preferences, and choices which the state identifies as essential to strengthening its geopolitical competitiveness, or, alternatively, to weakening the competitiveness of an adversary. In his seminal work *Soft Power*, political scientist Joseph Nye lays out the case for attracting populations of other states to American culture, political ideals, and policies—the intellectual architecture that has come to underpin much of today’s thinking about public diplomacy.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their lofty rhetoric, governments seldom engage in public diplomacy because it’s nice or the right thing to do. Whether it’s dispatching COVID vaccines to poor states, funding libraries of great works for readers without access to them, or broadcasting news, commentary, or music into countries exercising information or media monopolies, public diplomacy practiced by governments, while beneficial, is not intended to be altruistic or sentimental. Rather, it has both general and specific objectives that states often cannot achieve in other ways.

Nor is public diplomacy intended to be non-partisan or unbiased. Public diplomacy is the vehicle for distinctive national points of view and preferences. Different states adopt different styles of public diplomacy, but all seek to impart their perspectives in ways that advance their geostrategic objectives. The

European Union’s public diplomacy, for instance, insistently points to shared values among member states. China’s “wolf warriors,” meanwhile, use combative rhetoric to disseminate distinctive, hard-to-miss points of view that reflect their government’s objectives, strategies, interests, and values.

## THE MUDDLE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

U.S. public diplomacy is often criticized for lacking a strong point of view, or, perhaps worse, for having multiple points of view, which may or may not agree, that emanate from different government institutions with different missions and programs. This is reflected in how public diplomacy is currently packaged under a variety of names and approaches. Soft power, smart power, strategic communications, building civil society, political warfare, propaganda, and information operations are among public diplomacy’s past or current operational threads, with each approach mirroring the objectives the parent institution defines as essential to its mission. Even psychological operations, or psyops, is sometimes described by its advocates as a kind of public diplomacy, despite employing feints and deception.

In the past few decades, this discussion—how we can coordinate our instruments of public diplomacy to eliminate contradictions and create something larger than the sum of their parts—has ebbed and flowed. Meetings continue to take place among public diplomacy principals from different institutions and offices throughout the federal bureaucracy where plans and strategies are shared. But the result is often rampant confusion and turf warfare, not just among separate institutions but even within the same ones, about what



public diplomacy is and what it seeks to achieve.

Misalignment is a predictable outcome. Imagine, for example, the U.S. military's necessary efforts to build alliances or partnerships with states whose governance is less than democratic or human rights records are imperfect, while U.S. international broadcasting simultaneously saturates media with stories of corruption, human rights violations, and social inequalities in those places. A Georgian colleague recently underlined to me the disconnect between his country's soldiers fighting and dying alongside their American colleagues in Afghanistan while U.S. international broadcasters trash his country's politics and leaders. "Whose side are you guys on?" he wanted to know. (The broadcasters' defense? That they are "independent journalists" before they are instruments of U.S. foreign policy.)

The United States celebrates its multiple voices and viewpoints, as it should. Completely overcoming public diplomacy misalignment for a country like the U.S. is probably not possible, because the messaging of our policymakers, diplomats, broadcasters, and military leaders has no central coordination of the kind one associates with China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea. In her important book on U.S. popular culture and America's image abroad, Martha Bayles concisely describes the growing challenges to U.S. public diplomacy, concluding that "a more focused and authoritative voice" and more balance among the competing messages over which the U.S. government has influence is overdue.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the notion of a public diplomacy "tsar" at the cabinet or sub-cabinet level, one whose principal duty would be to craft guidelines for strategies that might align the disparate public diplomacy voices more closely with identifiable national objectives and policies, has never gained traction.

More focus and balance may be the best we can hope for, but how do we get it? 9/11 was a watershed moment for empowering our public diplomacy. Yet, as Bayles notes, "too often the next step is not serious reform but a quick fix or faddish enthusiasm that fails to give new focus and substance to U.S. public diplomacy."<sup>3</sup>

This discussion takes on greater urgency in today's rapidly evolving geostrategic environment, which features rapid movement among virtually all of the actors upon whom the United States depends or with whom it allies or competes. Many are moving away from familiar international relations toward instability, new and often unprecedented alliances and associations, and, frequently, hostility toward the United States and its objectives. Past public diplomacy practices and techniques will struggle in this environment, for reasons that are now becoming glaringly apparent.

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First, the traditional appeal of America's transcendent values has declined in parts of the world and among important demographics—young people, in particular—where it was once unassailable. Sometimes, this aversion centers on particular American issues, policies, or personalities. Sometimes, it is little more than group dynamics at work. And it persists alongside the desperate desire of many foreigners who still seek the political freedom, economic opportunity, and creative energy that the U.S. continues to offer, as evinced by the hundreds of thousands of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. across southern borders, the long queues for H12B and educational visas that are a constant feature of consular life, or the popularity of visa lotteries. Yet the decline is noticeable. For example, that only 51% of Germans and 23% of Turks today believe that the United States is a reliable partner—with the largest number of detractors among the younger cohorts—suggests that public diplomacy's challenge in places it once resonated with little opposition is substantial.<sup>4</sup>



**“Public diplomacy now faces a number of traditional targets that have hardened substantially. In places like Russia, China, much of the Middle East, and Latin America, not only has America’s historic appeal diminished, but local authoritarians and autocrats openly challenge U.S. policies and values, often with substantial popular support.”**

Second, public diplomacy now faces a number of traditional targets that have hardened substantially. In places like Russia, China, much of the Middle East, and Latin America, not only has America’s historic appeal diminished, but local authoritarians and autocrats openly challenge U.S. policies and values, often with substantial popular support. Of course, this is not true across the entire socio-political spectrum in these hardening states; some demographics are pulled strongly toward American values and policies. But many are not. This suggests that public diplomacy’s value to geopolitics and for achieving America’s interests should focus specifically on audiences that can advance those interests.

Third, generating widespread popular support for America in the digital universe is likely to prove elusive. Unlike the analog communications networks of old, today’s global digital universe is vastly bigger in both reach and volume—and most of it is decidedly negative. At the same time, digital connectivity empowers popular participation on a massive scale, allowing attitude multipliers to live and breed in social media and generating enormous barriers for public diplomacy to overcome. Imagine the plausible scenario of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan resulting in the massacre of thousands of innocents, the re-enslavement of women, the collapse of civil society, and the suppression of education. This horrific picture will not dribble out of Central Asia through the dispatches of a few intrepid

reporters, as it might have a few decades ago, but rather in an online flood of graphic information and images, stitched together and amplified by the vivid testimonies of the victims, then published and re-broadcast repeatedly by mainstream media—including, one assumes, by the Voice of America. Can public diplomacy preempt such an information disaster, or mitigate its corrosive impact on America’s image globally?

Fourth, state-sponsored disinformation capabilities that seek to influence their own populations while simultaneously shaping U.S. geopolitical choices have proliferated among America’s adversaries. Disinformation has thus become central to public diplomacy competition. The logical response to countering false, spun, or incomplete information has been to set the record straight, presumably with information that is not any of those things. Yet this seems a particularly difficult challenge on the digital landscape, with its myriad overlapping competing voices, attitudes, loyalties, and identities. Does “the truth” imparted with American cachet carry special weight in this environment? And is setting the record straight going to be enough to move the needle?

Fifth, the old, familiar map of alliances is beginning to blur for many countries, the United States included. Geopolitical realignments are accelerating. National security planners understand that, as America’s percentage of the world economic pie declines, and as those of our competitors increase, challenges to our interests will increasingly require the assistance of allies, perhaps in places where alliances once seemed unwanted or implausible. But some of our best allies are drifting away. The academic and policy blogosphere, for instance, is abuzz these days with laments for the demise of “the transatlantic relationship.” And in Asia, strong movements aim to push pivotal states like Japan and South Korea further from the U.S. What is public diplomacy’s role with respect to allies? How do we keep and build the confidence of democratic states that already know us, while at the same time attracting allies who may not share our values?

All these questions require new thinking in a global environment that has changed, and is changing,



**“State-sponsored disinformation capabilities that seek to influence their own populations while simultaneously shaping U.S. geopolitical choices have proliferated among America’s adversaries. Disinformation has thus become central to public diplomacy competition.”**

fundamentally. Yet little has changed in America’s public diplomacy apparatus, and there is little to suggest an understanding among its practitioners of how global challenges are now significantly different. No serious coordinating function for the government’s public diplomacy exists at the White House or National Security Council level, leaving public diplomacy and its many operational threads largely unattached to U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, as of this writing, some eight months into the new Biden administration, no one has yet been nominated to fill the State Department’s top public diplomacy post, that of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Neither has anyone been nominated to lead the U.S. Agency for Global Media, international broadcasting’s home base.

### RETHINKING THE MISSION

To connect public diplomacy to America’s geopolitical aspirations and strategies, it is time for a fresh start, beginning with gathering a serious cast of experts, not necessarily Washington insiders, with eyes on the horizon, to ask some foundational questions.

First, what do we want our public diplomacy to achieve? How should it dovetail with U.S. geopolitical objectives and foreign policy? What goals should we set for it, and how can we measure results? What assumptions about public diplomacy as practiced today can no longer be sustained? How do we develop a new, relevant set of assumptions, including the most difficult: where does public diplomacy have no relevance at all?

Second, what audiences do we hope to influence?

Should public diplomacy distinguish among different demographics, ethnicities, cultures, religions, local and regional preferences or other organic distinctions? How? Is a centrally-driven strategy possible, or should public diplomacy be left to multiple local practitioners, for example embassy officers? How much of our effort should be offense (preemption), and how much defense (course correction)?

Third, can we achieve these objectives with the tools at hand? Which tools are no longer competitive in today’s information and influence environment? Which are counter-productive? And where do today’s instruments compete or, worse, contradict each other? What new instruments are necessary, why, and how do we develop them?

Fourth, what can we learn from the competition? Where do we witness success, and are the dynamics of that success adaptable to our own practices?

Fifth, how should the U.S. government manage its public diplomacy going forward, assuming that the questions above produce answers that will vary considerably from today’s thinking and practice? What degree of coordination/cooperation is possible among various institutions and voices? Where should ultimate authority for U.S. public diplomacy operations lie? Should there be an ultimate authority, or is ad hoc-ism the best we can do?

President Biden has long harbored an abiding interest in public diplomacy. It is time for him to indulge it by establishing a presidential commission to address the questions above, and to recommend policy for identifying how a vibrant, adaptable, and forward-looking public diplomacy strategy can advance America’s geopolitical interests in the years ahead.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Martha Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America’s Image Abroad* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>4</sup> 2021 *Transatlantic Trends: Transatlantic opinion on global challenges* (German Marshall Fund of the United States and Bertelsmann Foundation, 2021), [https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/TT2021\\_Web\\_Version.pdf](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/TT2021_Web_Version.pdf).





# The Keys to Effective Public Diplomacy

*Robert A. Schadler*

The mission of public diplomacy is to further the national interest by influencing key foreign “publics” and, to a lesser degree, the general public, to better understand and support prevailing governmental policy. Overall, the process is to interest, and then to inform—with the hope that a better understanding will result in less opposition to, and greater support for, the overall role of the U.S. in world affairs. At its core lies a key premise: that public diplomacy is about far more than public relations or simply “soft power.” Indeed, the “last battle of the Cold War” over the placement of nuclear weapons in NATO countries (1979-1987) was largely a public diplomacy effort.

For the United States, public diplomacy represents a uniquely important strategic tool. Because of America’s military prowess, its economic dominance, and its cultural and technological sophistication, people everywhere are interested in the U.S. In turn, what they know or don’t know (or think they know) about America affects U.S. policy in profound ways. Quite simply, no other country today is more reliant on public diplomacy to serve as a foundation for its national security and foreign policy. Indeed, for many nations, public diplomacy is of only minimal importance. What the Sri Lankan public and its leaders think of, say, Uruguay may be largely irrelevant. The United States finds itself at the other extreme; because America has a truly global footprint, what people in virtually every country think of the United States is of real consequence.

## CORE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY

Here, it’s crucial to understand the inherent differences between traditional and public diplomacy, which have been conflated all too often. The two could

not be more different.

Traditional diplomacy largely follows historical and common practices in its primary responsibility of dealing with officials in other governments. It consists largely of negotiating agreements with other nation-state governments and multilateral organizations, reporting about those countries primarily on political and economic matters, and assisting U.S. citizens and organizations when they are in distress abroad or trying to accomplish something in a foreign country. As such, it is thoroughly grounded in the nation-state system and most work and personal interaction is with government officials, most of whom are well educated, speak fluent English and are generally informed about the U.S. and its policies (and often have traveled or even lived in the U.S.). Among the nearly 200 governments of the world, there may be something like 50,000 government officials that interact with American diplomats in the conduct of traditional diplomacy. It is largely carried out in the capitals of nation-states, with people who speak English and understand the protocols and tools of traditional diplomacy.

Public diplomacy, particularly for the U.S., is quite different. While it does not need to engage with all of the globe’s 7 billion-plus people, it surely must, on some level, reach many, many tens of millions—and do so steadily and consistently. These include people of almost all walks of professional life whose understanding of the U.S., its people and policies might be minimal but who still have significance influence in their country, whether it be political, journalistic, academic, cultural, religious, philanthropic, scientific or commercial. The concerns of these individuals and groups may or may not follow nation-state borders. Religious, cultural, ideological and ethnic, linguistic and other affinities may be more narrow or far more expansive than any particular nation-state.



In a globalized world, public diplomacy needs to be organized in ways that facilitate the importance, scope, size and enormous complexities of public diplomacy and its efficient and effective execution. While operationally public diplomacy should be based in the U.S. embassy, its focus may be outside the capital—whether elsewhere in the country or more regional. Many public diplomacy programs require access by the public, meaning both marketing and security matters are paramount. In sum, public diplomacy activities and their organizational needs may not coincide, structurally and organizationally, with those of traditional diplomacy.

The primary focus of public diplomacy may vary dramatically from country to country, or from one time period to another. A naval base may be fully accepted by the general public for decades, but might then emerge as a controversial issue in a political campaign. Study in the U.S. may be intensely desired by some and greatly opposed by others. The study and use of English may be obvious to some and resisted by others.

Simultaneously, public diplomacy has several time horizons: immediate, intermediate, and long-term. Placing an article disputing disinformation about the U.S. may require immediate attention. Choosing mid-term professionals for a study tour of the U.S. may have a 10- or 20-year horizon before results can be expected. Fulbright professorships and book translations may have an even longer-term payout.

Nor are cultural, political and economic public diplomacy concerns always centered on a nation's capital city. Personnel for an effective diplomacy require different skill sets than traditional diplomats. And the supervisory structure for public diplomacy needs to align closely with traditional diplomacy and the embassy mission in capital cities, but also needs to be responsive to other strategic priorities—and to focus on places outside the capital where key audiences are located.

Given all of the above, the U.S. public diplomacy effort needs to have its own bureaucratic autonomy, ideally in the form of a standalone agency. It needs to work

in close coordination with other national security and foreign affairs agencies (e.g., the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security) and also be given the authority to coordinate the wide range of public diplomacy activities in other agencies (such as the Departments of Education and Commerce). Finally, it needs to be aware of, and interact with, a wide range of private sector activities that support or can be supportive of U.S. public diplomacy objectives.

### THE NECESSITY OF AUTONOMY

From the 1940s to October 1, 1999, U.S. public diplomacy was housed in such a distinct government entity. At its zenith in the Cold War, that body—the United States Information Agency, or USIA—was about forty percent as large as the State Department in terms of both budget and personnel. Such an agency, with its sole mission being public diplomacy, needs to be reconstituted today in some fashion. While the strategic mission is to foster U.S. national interests, the size, scope, range, audiences, issues, tools, programs and personnel are distinct from what traditional diplomacy requires.

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**“Public diplomacy programs also need a degree of separation from the State Department. A government may be hostile to the U.S. generally, or it may be narrowly antagonistic to U.S. public diplomacy priorities, such as promoting democratic governance. When a dictator complains to the Secretary of State about such initiatives, an independent public diplomacy bureaucracy provides Foggy Bottom with plausible deniability.”**

For instance, public diplomacy needs to be nimble when news issues and key audiences emerge, and its practitioners need to be able to engage directly with Congress when budgets and personnel must be configured to meet those challenges. Public diplomacy programs also need a degree of separation from the State Department. A government may be hostile to the U.S. generally, or it may be narrowly antagonistic to U.S. public diplomacy priorities, such as promoting democratic governance. When a dictator complains to the Secretary of State about such initiatives, an independent public diplomacy bureaucracy provides Foggy Bottom with plausible deniability.

The converse can also be true. Hostility on the part of a given government to the U.S. and its brand may be far different than the view of its population. In fact, there is often great regard for the role the U.S. plays on the part of a given public, precisely because its government—the government which the public holds in low regard—views America as hostile. When that is the case, the importance of public diplomacy may greatly outweigh whatever it may be possible for traditional diplomats to achieve.

Another key difference, and often a vital one, is that traditional diplomacy is bounded by official diplomatic recognition. When that is absent, traditional diplomacy is greatly limited. In such circumstances, public diplomacy programs, via radio, tv and social media, may be almost all that can be done to reach and influence key groups in target countries.

### PRIDE OF PLACE

The organization of public diplomacy naturally flows from its mission, size, scope, complexity and importance. In order to be effective, it needs a nimble and flexible structure to deal with changing policies—and the resources and personnel to respond to those policy needs.

In its heyday during the Cold War, American policymakers understood this reality, and appreciated the contributions that public diplomacy could make to the advancement of national interests and strategic objectives in the decades-long struggle against the Soviet Union. By contrast, the post-Cold War era has been characterized by strategic drift on the part of the U.S. public diplomacy apparatus, and therefore in America’s overall power of persuasion. It is high time to restore public diplomacy to its proper pride of place in the U.S. strategic arsenal.



## Reforming the Bureaucracy of Influence

*James S. Robbins*

The public diplomacy bureaucracy of the United States was once a robust collection of agencies with a clear mission, strong leadership, motivated workforce, and a track record of positive results. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, public diplomacy has become a victim of its own success. Today's public diplomacy agencies and components are plagued with institutional drift, flawed messaging, diminished influence, and poor morale. Reforming this apparatus, in turn, should begin with a return to first principles—reaffirming the purpose of the various agencies as elements of American national power and re-establishing the mission and structure of the agencies to advance United States government policies.

### BACK WHEN IT WORKED

Public information agencies exist to support and promote American policies abroad, while also countering adversary messaging seeking to harm the U.S. image and promote disinformation. During the Cold War, this messaging was aligned with U.S. foreign strategy and avoided domestic partisan politics, an effective approach that garnered bipartisan backing. The United States Information Agency (USIA), Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (now RFE/RL) and other agencies gave citizens of communist countries news and information that was denied them by their governments, offering the kind of pro-freedom, pro-human rights narratives that totalitarian governments tried to suppress.

This did not mean presenting the United States as a model society. Famed reporter Edward R. Murrow, who directed the USIA during the Kennedy

administration, noted that “we cannot be effective in telling the American story abroad if we tell it only in superlatives.”<sup>1</sup> For example, Murrow actively promoted USIA reporting on the civil rights issues of his day, but in the context of American social progress, to counter communist information campaigns focused on racism and rioting.

Ronald Reagan also understood the immense value of public diplomacy as a tool in Cold War competition. Reagan's USIA director, Charles Wick, expanded his agency's efforts, doubled its budget, and pioneered new ways to reach larger foreign audiences. Wick's purpose was clear; he said, “telling about America means telling people about America's foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup> For the public diplomacy mission there was no daylight between Wick's agency and the White House.

### POST-COLD WAR DRIFT

This style of vigorous, focused public diplomacy contributed to the U.S. victory in the Cold War. But in the “end of history” euphoria of the early 1990s, some in government felt that the funding spent on these efforts should become part of the ensuing “peace dividend.” A series of reforms and retrenchments followed; USIA was disbanded, and agencies such as VOA, RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia, TV/Radio Marti and others were grouped in the new International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), under the oversight of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). Other USIA functions were moved to the State Department and placed under the new Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Much later, in 2018, the IBB/BBG structure was reorganized as the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) with a presidentially appointed



CEO. In general over this period, public diplomacy efforts were downgraded, and none of the latter-day leaders had the same access, influence or stature as Murrow or Wick.

In addition to restructuring, a baffling new mission culture developed which detached these organizations from the idea that they existed to promote American national interests. One BBG Board member made the point explicitly at a 2002 VOA town hall meeting, stating that “we’ve got to start thinking about ourselves separate from public diplomacy.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of detachment has grown to the point where it has become accepted among the components under the USAGM umbrella that their primary mission is simply to show the world what a free press looks like—something the world already knows from the private sector media.

There is also no longer a reason to worry, as Murrow had, about excessive pro-American reporting. Negative narratives are plentiful, from sources foreign and domestic. USAGM has followed this trend and its content has become so negatively skewed that attempts to promote objective, somewhat positive stories about America have been denounced as political propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

This confusion about the public diplomacy mission may contribute to the fact that employees tasked with executing it have long had among the worst morale in government. A 2020 independent survey of Federal worker satisfaction by the Partnership for Public Service found USAGM ranked dead last of 411 government agencies.<sup>5</sup> There have also been periodic charges of waste, fraud and abuse leveled at the agency and its predecessors.<sup>6</sup> And the Office of Personnel Management found a widespread and systematic pattern of security clearance violations so severe that it “posed a serious risk to both the agency and the Federal Government as a whole.”<sup>7</sup>

Criticism of the obvious dysfunction in American public diplomacy is bipartisan and longstanding. In 2013 then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton famously told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the then-BBG was “practically defunct in terms of its capacity to be able to tell a message around the world.” Matters have not improved since then.

**“In addition to restructuring, a baffling new mission culture developed which detached U.S. public diplomacy organizations from the idea that they existed to promote American national interests...This sense of detachment has grown to the point where it has become accepted among the components under the USAGM umbrella that their primary mission is simply to show the world what a free press looks like—something the world already knows from the private sector media.”**

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

Communicating is still critical to the successful prosecution of U.S. foreign policy. The post-Cold War structural and philosophical changes in U.S. public diplomacy were based on the flawed premise that the information domain would no longer be a meaningful battleground. Some believed that the “war of ideas” was over, and that western democracies had won.

However, adversary nations have a clear and continuing understanding of the role of information as a weapon. Authoritarian states like China, Russia and Iran are experts at this form of competition, since they use it domestically as well as abroad, and are not bound by ideas like freedom of the press or objective notions of truth. Non-state actors such as ISIS have also shown remarkable aptitude in exploiting information-age technology to reach disparate global audiences with their destructive ideology.

These anti-American messaging efforts are only abetted by the increasingly self-critical narratives promoted by U.S. public diplomacy organs, under the naïve view that their doing so demonstrates the openness of the American system. In fact, the endless



self-criticism of the United States only serves to validate the negative information being spread by America's international critics.

What, then, is to be done? The public diplomatic mission to provide open information to closed societies is as important now as it was during the Cold War. This "right to know" enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is central to the spread and development of freedom and democracy. However, the optimism of the 1990s that the explosion of information technology would naturally expand the zone of freedom has been dashed by authoritarian regimes using the same technology to create increasingly insidious control mechanisms. Communist China has been a world leader at developing advanced censorship techniques, as well as its freedom-destroying social credit system.<sup>8</sup> This speaks to a growing need for means to defeat foreign censorship and expand access to information inside total states.

It is no surprise that closed societies are most hostile to the right to know, because their governments see it as a threat to power and control. Hence, a critical mission from the very inception of U.S. public diplomacy has been to penetrate the walls of censorship and provide information to these countries. Yet even as the need for access grew more and more acute, the USAGM-sponsored Open Technology Fund became mired in controversy over alleged fraud and lack of meaningful oversight.<sup>9</sup> Thus, any reform efforts must address the means to engage the struggle for Internet freedom and focus on responsibly funding effective technology to counter censorship abroad.

But other measures are also needed. To make the country competitive once again in the information domain, Congress should take strong steps to reverse the negative aspects of previous reform efforts and restore public diplomacy to first principles.

Such an effort begins with organization. Congress needs to create a new structure that reunifies all the public diplomacy functions and components, thereby fusing USAGM with the mission areas previously placed under the State Department to form a new, more powerful USIA-like organization. This new independent agency should be made a cabinet-level entity, reporting directly to the President, and with commensurate bureaucratic influence in interagency planning and policy processes, in recognition of the importance of the information element of national power.

Once established, the new agency will need to be entrusted to a dynamic, experienced leader who understands and is eager to implement the mission to support, not reflexively critique or undermine, U.S. policy. And it must be seeded with officials in leadership positions who prioritize seeking best practices to raise employee morale and inculcate a sense of mission and purpose.

The new agency, free of the market pressures that have harmed and diminished the reputation of journalism, should establish itself as the gold standard for accuracy and integrity in its reporting. By avoiding the hyper-partisanship and sensationalism that increasingly dominates the media, the agency could serve as an example of what news truly can be. Finally, the new agency must have significant budget support from Congress, with strong oversight provisions to counter the recent tendency towards corruption in the public diplomacy sector.

All this should be animated by a core understanding. Public diplomacy, properly conceived, structured and executed, is an important element of U.S. national power. It can both defend the United States from the hostile information campaigns of adversary states and promote American values and policies around the globe. It can also help defeat the increasingly

**"Any reform efforts must address the means to engage the struggle for Internet freedom and focus on responsibly funding effective technology to counter censorship abroad."**



sophisticated censorship technology used by authoritarian states to maintain power. So long as the free flow of information is restricted, such programs will be necessary for the United States to make its case to the world.

## ENDNOTES

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# Toward a Public Diplomacy Strategy for the 21st Century

*Ilan Berman*

Today, American public diplomacy is in crisis. Official outreach to foreign publics represents one of the most potent instruments of “soft power” available to the United States. Yet U.S. public diplomacy has eroded significantly since its heyday at the height of the Cold War, when American broadcasts and messaging engaged foreign publics behind the Iron Curtain and played an integral role in shaping the ideas that brought down the Soviet bloc. Through a combination of bureaucratic reshuffling and official neglect, the post-Cold War era has seen an erosion of the efficiency, vision and impact of American strategic communications. The aggregate result was that, by 2003, a high level governmental advisory panel had already concluded that the United States had undergone a process of “unilateral disarmament” in “the weapons of advocacy.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the situation has only worsened in the years since, as the proliferation of new communications technologies, the rise of social media platforms, and the spread of “fake news” and disinformation have made the international media environment more contested—and more saturated—than ever before. Competing in this new, hostile terrain requires the United States to rebuild the vibrancy, impact and persuasive potential of its international outreach. Such an effort begins with an accurate understanding of today’s more congested, adversarial and crowded global media environment.

## HOSTILE TERRAIN

In 1963, Edward R. Murrow, the country’s preeminent journalist, testified before Congress on the role of public diplomacy in the Cold War struggle against the

Soviet Union. “American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst,” Murrow explained. “To be persuasive we must believable; to be believable we must credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that.”<sup>2</sup>

This strategy was tremendously successful during the decades of the Cold War. At the height of their popularity, it is estimated that the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty jointly reached as much as 80 percent of the population of Eastern Europe, and half of the citizens of the Soviet Union, on a weekly basis.<sup>3</sup> The arguments, ideas and discussions aired on those outlets helped to empower an emerging generation of leaders within the Soviet bloc—activists who, armed with Western values, would emerge to challenge the authority of the Soviet state. Today, however, the global media environment confronting the United States is very different in several respects.

- **A MORE SATURATED MEDIA SPHERE.** For decades, the news cycle was both limited and predictable, consisting of a comparatively small number of reliable, and authoritative, outlets. By contrast, today’s media sphere is characterized by a growing deluge of global information, in which traditional sources of media are increasingly challenged by new (and often unreliable) information outlets. At the same time, the proliferation of social media platforms has left users vulnerable to opaque algorithms and the political biases of unaccountable editors. These trends have undermined the traditional hierarchy and authority of established media.





- **THE RISE OF “AUTHORITARIAN MEDIA.”** The dynamics above have created conditions that are deeply favorable to the growth and expansion of authoritarian modes of expression—a reality that the world’s most repressive states understand all too well. In recent years, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Qatar have all invested heavily in promoting their own, weaponized sources of information, erecting vast national media infrastructures designed to supplant and eclipse Western news sources and carrying out disinformation operations designed to demolish trust in democratic institutions and ideas.<sup>4</sup> More and more, hostile actors are embracing the strategic use of information and propaganda to solidify their domestic position and advance their foreign policy objectives at the expense of Western values. The most prominent examples include Russia’s persistent attempts to spread “fake news” and political disinformation on social media platforms and, more recently, the massive propaganda campaign surrounding the coronavirus pandemic that has been marshalled by the PRC over the past year-and-a-half.
- **LOWER BARRIERS TO ENTRY.** One defining feature of the contemporary media environment is that it is now far easier to become a player in it. The proliferation of new technology and the ubiquitous nature of social media has effectively “flattened” the playing field, allowing non-state actors to expand their messaging and global reach and do so at much lower costs than ever before.<sup>5</sup> In turn, radical groups like the Islamic State have taken advantage of this opening to expand their ideological messaging and global reach, to great effect.<sup>6</sup>

In light of these changes, a compelling case can be made that the United States needs a new and more assertive informational strategy to better promote its ideas, values and principles to global publics. In order to be effective, however, such an approach will need to simultaneously accomplish a number of critical strategic objectives.

**“In order for its message to resonate with global publics, the United States needs to target its outreach to those places where American ideas about freedom, opportunity, and liberal democracy will have the greatest resonance. American influence, in other words, needs to be directed at where the audiences are.”**

#### FOLLOWING THE DEMOGRAPHICS

There’s an old anecdote about Willie Sutton, the famed bank robber who was responsible for a string of heists throughout the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. When finally apprehended by Federal agents, the story goes, Sutton was asked why he robbed banks. His answer was both simple and profound: because that’s where the money was.

That axiom has come to be known as “Sutton’s law,” and it holds enormous relevance for the future of U.S. influence. For, in order for its message to resonate with global publics, the United States needs to target its outreach to those places where American ideas about freedom, opportunity, and liberal democracy will have the greatest resonance. American influence, in other words, needs to be directed at where the audiences are.

During the decades of the Cold War, that was the Soviet bloc, where captive populations chafed under the repressive rule and bankrupt political ideology of the Kremlin. American outreach, in turn, contributed to their intellectual awakening and eventual political liberation. Today, however, the focus has shifted to different global regions.

The first of these is Asia, which is now home to roughly 60 percent of the world’s population.<sup>7</sup> It is also a critical battleground in at least two strategic contests. One is the “war of ideas” taking place within the Muslim World, between extreme interpretations of the faith propounded by groups like the Islamic State and more moderate, inclusive ones such as Indonesia’s “Islam Nusantara,” which posits Islam’s compatibility with both modernity and democracy.<sup>8</sup> Another is the unfolding



**“An October 2020 poll by the prestigious Pew Research Center documented what amounts to a dramatic decline in global support for China’s government and its policies. These shifting global attitudes provide a critical opening for the United States. With deft and persistent messaging about the PRC’s deformities, ranging from its predatory economic practices to ongoing (and egregious) domestic human rights abuses, America can help provide an alternative perspective to global publics who are now being bombarded with messages about the benevolence and inevitability of the Chinese ‘model.’”**

“great power competition” between China and the United States, which has evolved into not simply an economic contest but an ideological one as well, between the PRC’s model of adaptive authoritarianism and Western liberal democracy (more on this below).

The second is Africa, which is now in the throes of a massive demographic expansion. The continent’s population currently stands at 1.34 billion, but—buoyed by high birth rates and fertility—is projected to nearly double, to 2.48 billion, by 2050.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the continent is currently the world’s youngest, with a median age of just 19.5.<sup>10</sup> This cohort is growing rapidly, and will increase by nearly 50 percent by the end of this decade—and is projected to more than double in size by 2055.<sup>11</sup> All of which makes Africa a critically important theater where U.S. ideas and values need to resonate in the decades ahead.

As of yet, however, U.S. broadcasting does not reflect these demographic priorities. For instance, in 2020, messaging to South and East Asia accounted for just 30 percent of the *Voice of America’s* overall budget.<sup>12</sup> Messaging to Africa was even more paltry, garnering

less than 12 percent of VOA’s budgetary allocations.<sup>13</sup> This represents a critical error. For, in order to be most impactful, the United States needs to anticipate where future audiences will be in the years ahead, and adapt accordingly.

#### COMPETING INFORMATIONALLY WITH CHINA

The past several years has seen a profound redefinition of American relationship with, and approach to, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Beginning under the Trump administration and continuing into the Biden era, the U.S. has abandoned the longstanding view that it was possible to transform the PRC into a “responsible stakeholder” on the world stage through deeper economic and political engagement.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it has increasingly embraced the understanding that China’s government is exploiting the liberal world order to subvert democratic principles globally, and that “long-term strategic competition” with

Beijing is necessary.<sup>15</sup> But while the resulting strategic contest is now unfolding in a variety of arenas, from supply chains to trade, it has yet to touch upon that of information.

This represents a dangerous oversight, because China is actively engaged in shaping the international media environment to its advantage. At home, the Chinese government has erected a massive, comprehensive architecture of internet control, media manipulation and nationalist messaging designed to solidify the authority of the ruling Communist Party and denigrate its opponents.<sup>16</sup> Abroad, the PRC is engaged in an aggressive (and ongoing) information operations campaign intended to reshape the contours of global discourse—and do so in ways that disadvantage the United States. This has included strident “wolf warrior diplomacy” by Chinese diplomats in the media and on social media platforms, as well as the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation relating to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Promptly and comprehensively refuting these falsehoods is essential to maintaining American competitiveness in the “battle of narratives”



now taking place with Beijing.

It is also vital if the United States hopes to tap into changing global perceptions of China, in order to rally allies to its side. Here, an important opportunity exists; since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, international attitudes about China have undergone a profound shift. An October 2020 poll by the prestigious Pew Research Center, for instance, documented what amounts to a dramatic decline in global support for China's government and its policies.<sup>18</sup>

These shifting global attitudes provide a critical opening for the United States. With deft and persistent messaging about the PRC's deformities, ranging from its predatory economic practices to ongoing (and egregious) domestic human rights abuses, America can help provide an alternative perspective to global publics who are now being bombarded with messages about the benevolence and inevitability of the Chinese "model." At the same time, the U.S. needs to invest more deeply in those technologies capable of breaching China's "Great Firewall" and loosening the PRC's stranglehold on information within its own borders.

### GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT CIRCUMVENTION

In the Fall of 2019, Iran was convulsed by what was the latest in a string of increasingly widespread social protests. The Iranian regime responded in predictable fashion, putting security forces into the streets to cow protesters into silence. But it also leaned heavily on a new tool: internet suppression. Beginning in mid-November, the Iranian regime blocked virtually all Web traffic within its national borders, and kept it off for nearly a week, until it had regained the upper hand.<sup>19</sup>

That same tactic was apparent this past summer in the Western Hemisphere. When thousands of Cubans took to the streets to protest the island nation's deepening economic crisis, the government of Miguel Diaz-Canel engineered a blackout of social media sites and the internet in an attempt to prevent their plight from reaching the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Cuba's internet cutoff, and the earlier Iranian one, underscore an alarming new trend. More and more, authoritarian regimes—which already limit access to the World Wide Web and foreign media for their citizens—are resorting to all-out media and internet blackouts as part of their repressive tactics. Indeed, in its most recent Freedom on the Net report, democracy watchdog Freedom House noted that "Global Internet Freedom has declined for the 10th consecutive year," and that it had observed "intentional disruptions" in a record 22 of the 65 countries it tracked.<sup>21</sup>

**"America needs to clearly and unequivocally communicate that it is committed to maintaining free and open internet and media, both in word and by deed (through ramped up funding for proven circumvention tools and promising potential ones). Doing so would send a powerful signal to dissidents and political activists the world over that the United States remains committed to anti-censorship and the free flow of ideas."**

How can the United States best respond to this trend? Cuba's temporary internet blackout prompted calls from U.S. officials for "intervention" in order to restore connectivity.<sup>22</sup> And while no action was ultimately taken by the White House, the United States does indeed have a number of concrete tools at its disposal to restore or maintain its connections with repressed publics. These include anti-censorship software such as Psiphon and Ultrasurf, which are already funded by the U.S. government via agencies like the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and the State Department. They also encompass private sector initiatives that could play a similar role in the future, among them the Starlink satellite constellation now being fielded by Elon Musk's SpaceX, and Raven, the stratospheric balloon company



that helped restore communications in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017. What is missing, however, is a comprehensive approach on the part of the United States for when, how and under what conditions it will step in to provide critical circumvention assistance to struggling opposition movements and unfree peoples.

That is an error. America needs to clearly and

against the Soviets, and consequently enjoyed top level attention within the corridors of the U.S. government. Underpinned by a succession of Executive Orders, strategic communications grew into an elaborate web of broadcast services and intrepid reporters unified under a single structure (the United States Information Agency, or USIA) and possessing a common objective:

“to further the achievement of U.S. foreign policy objectives,” as Murrow himself put it.<sup>23</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, however, both the structure and vision behind American outreach have atrophied. The 1999 dissolution of the USIA by Congress paved the way for the creation of a hybrid structure, part bureaucratic and part programmatic, to oversee American outreach. The result was a pronounced attrition of strategic vision, with the organs of public diplomacy coming to see themselves as separate from—and not beholden to—U.S. foreign policy priorities. The consequent drift has diminished the ability of American outreach to align with and amplify American diplomacy, and

profoundly muted the desire of its employees to do so.

Over the years, numerous efforts have been made to rectify this state of affairs. Back in 2004, the Pentagon’s elite Defense Science Board warned that America’s strategic communications apparatus was “in crisis,” and “must be transformed with a strength of purpose that matches our commitment to diplomacy, defense, intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security.”<sup>24</sup> And legislative champions such as former Congressmen Edward Royce (R-CA-39) and Eliot Engel (D-NY-16) attempted repeatedly to lay the groundwork for such a change during their time in office.

But it was not until the confirmation of Michael Pack as CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (the new name for America’s official broadcasting agency) in June 2020 that an overhaul of the agency began in earnest. During his brief, tumultuous tenure, Pack attempted to tackle a number of significant and pervasive problems afflicting U.S. public diplomacy, including bureaucratic mismanagement, instances of pervasive waste and fraud, and security clearance irregularities.<sup>25</sup> But the

**“In 2009, China allocated some \$6.6 billion to international messaging, spread across several state media institutions dedicated to influencing foreign publics. By 2017, scholars were estimating that Beijing was spending some \$10 billion annually on “soft power” initiatives, including broadcasting... Against this backdrop, America’s own public diplomacy budget is decidedly meager.”**

unequivocally communicate that it is committed to maintaining free and open internet and media, both in word and by deed (through ramped up funding for proven circumvention tools and promising potential ones). Doing so would send a powerful signal to dissidents and political activists the world over that the United States remains committed to anti-censorship and the free flow of ideas. It would also put today’s autocrats on notice regarding the same, and make it clear to them that the U.S. will actively work to thwart their attempts to choke off connectivity with their citizens.

### OPTIMIZING FOR SUCCESS

A final priority for the United States, and arguably the most important one, needs to be an overhauling of the *organization* of U.S. public diplomacy. That structure has been fundamentally transformed over the past thirty years—and not for the better.

During the decades of the Cold War, public diplomacy was a defining feature of America’s “soft power” strategy





way he set about doing so was depicted as enormously controversial and divisive by a hostile media,<sup>26</sup> and generated tremendous resistance from the USAGM's entrenched bureaucracy. These tensions culminated in the removal of Pack as USAGM CEO within the first hours of the Biden administration, and a subsequent restoration of the political *status quo ante* to the agency.<sup>27</sup>

Lost in this discourse has been the fact that the problems plaguing USAGM long predated Pack's tenure, and have persisted beyond his time at the agency's helm. Fixing those will go a long way toward determining whether the current administration—or the next one—can rely on USAGM and its constituent parts to faithfully communicate American ideas, principles and values to foreign publics.

### LOOKING AHEAD

What will it take to enact such changes? Two factors are critical if the United States is to optimize its outreach.

The first is resources. Various observers, dissatisfied with the current state of U.S. broadcasting, have from time to time counseled the defunding of this or that function or service. Such a remedy, however, is liable to make matters much worse, because America is currently being vastly outspent by its adversaries in the media domain.

The numbers indicate just how much. More than half-a-decade ago, Russia's government was already estimated by Congress to be spending more than \$600 million a year on external messaging.<sup>28</sup> A RAND Corporation study the following year estimated that the Kremlin's premier propaganda outlet, *Russia Today* (now RT), alone received \$300 million annually.<sup>29</sup> The Congressional inquiry into Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, meanwhile, concluded that the Russian government's funding of the notorious Internet Research Agency troll farm by itself amounted to \$1.25 million monthly.<sup>30</sup>

China, meanwhile, is spending far more. In 2009, China allocated some \$6.6 billion to international messaging, spread across several state media institutions dedicated to influencing foreign publics.<sup>31</sup> By 2017, scholars were estimating that Beijing was spending some \$10 billion annually on "soft power" initiatives,

including broadcasting.<sup>32</sup> And last year, Beijing bankrolled just one of these channels, *China Global Television* (CGNTV), to the tune of \$50 million.<sup>33</sup>

Against this backdrop, America's own public diplomacy budget is decidedly meager. In point of fact, funding for U.S. public diplomacy has not risen by any appreciable amount in the past two decades. Thus, the Bush administration's 2003 federal budget allocated some \$557 million for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (as the USAGM was then known).<sup>34</sup> Fast forward to the present, and the figures remain roughly the same; in its most recent funding request to Congress for Fiscal Year 2022, the USAGM asked for \$637.3 million to fund the totality of its operations.<sup>35</sup> A compelling argument can thus be made that the current level of funding is insufficient for the United States to maintain a competitive posture in a complex and adversarial media environment.

But additional funding for public diplomacy won't be forthcoming—or warranted—until serious changes are made to the structure and functioning of America's organs of influence. Given the internal inertia now afflicting America's instruments of "soft power," such changes require consistent guidance and attention from the upper echelons of the U.S. government. From the President on down, our elected officials need to prioritize communicating American values, principles and policies to foreign publics in a clear and consistent way.

Their efforts should be guided by a singular understanding: that rebuilding the vibrancy, impact and persuasive potential of the United States remains the key to securing America's global standing. That mission has never been more critical.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>14</sup> The idea was most famously articulated by then-Dep-

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