

Competitive  
Global  
Engagement:  
Strategic  
Communications  
and Public  
Diplomacy for  
the New Era

GGPC

ROBERT M. GATES  
GLOBAL POLICY CENTER



# Competitive Global Engagement: Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy for the New Era

## Executive Summary

In the midst of the now-intensifying struggle with China and Russia over the future of world order, Americans must ask whether we have the national security structures and tools we need to successfully compete in a protracted rivalry with two determined powers across many fronts.

The U.S.'s core instruments of global engagement—including strategic communications and public diplomacy—were crucial to waging and winning the Cold War with the Soviet Union. But, after the Soviet collapse, many came to believe these tools were no longer needed to defend America's interests and to foster and secure a freer, more equitable, and more peaceful international order.

Our political and policy neglect of global engagement has since generated glaring weaknesses in our national security and competitiveness toolkit. Meanwhile, Russia, and especially China, have invested heavily in these areas and built networks and capabilities reaching every corner of the globe. These capabilities significantly heighten the challenges to us and our foreign interests.

Given the seriousness of these challenges, former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates convened a forum in December 2022 to address the central question: What concrete actions can the U.S. take to reimagine and reconstitute our strategic communications and public diplomacy tools and to integrate these with our other instruments of national power to compete successfully in this new era?

The dozen participants in the inaugural Gates Forum on strategic communications and public diplomacy included senior representatives from across the executive branch, bipartisan

representation from Congress, and experts from outside of government. The forum's far-ranging discussions were supported by an extensive independent and original applied research effort led by the Global Research Institute at William & Mary.

This report from the Robert M. Gates Global Policy Center (GGPC) is neither a distillation of the independent research effort nor is it a consensus document reflecting the forum's proceedings. Rather, it provides a menu of GGPC's own recommendations and potential

remedies for revitalizing strategic communications and public diplomacy. Some of these proposals could be implemented unilaterally by the President or Secretary of State tomorrow. Others may require bureaucratic enhancements or restructuring but are meant to address issues which have hampered our redevelopment of a competitive global engagement capability. Still other options require bipartisan action in Congress to implement, and they should be a priority consideration on our national security and competitiveness agenda. ●

# Competitive Global Engagement: Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy for the New Era

The United States has been slow to modernize our national security structures to meet the challenges posed by Russian revanchism and a People's Republic of China determined to establish a China-dominated system in Asia and far beyond. Russia's war in Ukraine has shaken many from their torpor. It has spurred bipartisan action in Congress to make overdue investments in our armed forces, and important first steps have been taken to ensure the U.S. maintains leadership in the techno-economic competition with China. The executive branch has been innovating, too.

Still, the Russian assault on the post-1991 international order and China's many-faceted bid to recast it are now both set to increase, not lessen. In the face of this, Americans must ask: are we preparing ourselves with the national security structures and tools we really need to conduct a likely protracted contest against two determined rivals across many fronts?

It is important we remember how the last century's competition with the Soviet Union was waged and won. After 1945, our national leaders undertook to foster a freer and more equal community of nations so as to prevent another cataclysmic war. They also forged a

wholly new complex of security institutions and instruments to protect that post-war international order and enlarge it. Containing Soviet aggression necessitated a build-up of military forces commensurate to the task, but the larger geopolitical competition was conducted using nonmilitary methods. These included sweeping measures to deny the USSR access to advanced technology and economic tools for aiding fragile and contested nations afflicted by war, poverty, and threatened by hostile forces within and without. It also entailed, crucially, the creation of strategic instruments of communication and direct, on-the-ground engagement by which Americans developed new relationships with foreign governments, organizations, and individuals so as to gain their trust and support for a free and peaceful vision of the future.

One key component of this toolkit was the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which was created in 1953 by President Eisenhower to spearhead our strategic communications and public diplomacy globally. The agency's mandate was well-described by President Kennedy in 1963:

*[USIA] activities should (a) encourage constructive public support abroad for the goal of a peaceful world*

*community of free and independent states. . .*  
*(b) identify the United States as a strong,*  
*democratic, dynamic nation qualified for its*  
*leadership of world efforts toward this goal, and*  
*(c) unmask and counter hostile attempts to distort*  
*or frustrate the objectives and policies of the United*  
*States. These activities should emphasize the ways*  
*in which United States policies harmonize with*  
*those of other peoples and governments, and*  
*those aspects of American life and culture*  
*which facilitate sympathetic understanding*  
*of United States policies.*

It mattered not only what the USIA did but how. In addition to media broadcasts of news and opinion, the agency developed a global groundgame which employed thousands of officers to run outreach and informational programs individually tailored to the 150 countries in which they operated. USIA exposed Soviet propaganda, deception, and designs aimed at damaging the security of other nations and U.S. interests, and they made the public case for our policy and principles. USIA also listened and reported back to Washington about how our policies affected the lives of everyday people—and about the fine-tuning needed to gain their trust and cooperation. This made American power smarter and more responsive to the world as it really was. It also made our post-1945 grand strategy of fostering a freer and more equal peace among nations more competitive and successful. In effect, our national security was democratic world-craft, and it is impossible to explain the growth of free and independent states around the globe over the last seven

decades without acknowledging our deepening engagements in it.

After the Soviet empire disintegrated, the U.S. could have repurposed its worldwide communications and public diplomacy capabilities for the new peacetime. Instead, many came to think these tools were no longer needed to protect the future. In 1999, USIA was dissolved, parts of it were folded into the State Department, and much of our know-how and key structures for engaging foreign publics were left to atrophy. Since then, we have slumped deeper into amnesia about how the post-war international order was made, even as our newest competitors made a close study of it.

Russia's militarized bid to reverse the Cold War verdict and resurrect its empire was initiated years ago through a campaign of disinformation aimed at unraveling the West's coherence and resolve. Meanwhile, our most formidable rival, the People's Republic of China (PRC), has built a global strategic communications and foreign influence apparatus of its own. The Chinese Communist Party's sloganeering about a PRC-led "community of common destiny" is designed, first, to deflect attention away from its troubles and large-scale repression at home and, second, to weaken support for the post-war order and, ultimately, to surpass it. Beijing's rhetoric and aims are grandiose, but it also recognizes competitive world-craft is not about spinning "narratives" alone. The PRC has integrated its external media and influence operations with its world-straddling Belt and Road economic gambits and related technological initiatives to engineer new facts on the ground—particularly in the Global South.



In the anti-Soviet struggle, it was easy to link communism with material, cultural and spiritual deprivation. The Stalinist states promised that their repression would generate higher economic growth and a superior way of life compared to the free and democratic one. Instead, they became societies noted for shortages of every kind and soul-crushing oppression.

China's outreach has focused on political and cultural elites who fear open societies, but who also fear that mass deprivation will threaten their power—telling them that the “China Model” has squared this circle, that the link between political freedom and abundance can be broken—and that leaving the post-war international order and joining a Beijing-led one is the way

to do it. The appeal of this argument in many countries, in the Global South especially, is powerful and the U.S. needs to create a credible response to it.

But our effort to do so is still in its infancy. This is not due to a shortage of talent or good ideas at home, or of friends internationally. But what the collective makers of national policy do lack are the means by which to put all this together. For what the 2022 National Security Strategy aptly describes as the new “contest for the future of our world,” we do not yet have an effective or winning strategy for global engagement, nor do we have the coordinating structures, resources, and analytical and operational tools needed to devise and implement one. ●



# U.S. National Security Toolkit

The glaring weaknesses and hard-soft power imbalances in our national security toolkit have been well-acknowledged for years. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, efforts to revive our strategic communications and public diplomacy were poorly supported and unavailing, and our policy became over-militarized. Now, the urgency is far greater; the dangers to the country and the post-World War Two order have been dramatically heightened, while our margins for error have been shrunk.

Policymakers need strategic options and the full range of our national power if we are to compete successfully with determined rivals. The solution is not to bring back the USIA. But it does involve reimagining and reconstituting our public diplomacy and strategic communications tools and making them fit for the competition we're in.

## FOCUS

This demands, above all, focus. It's alleged, for example, that we've become too divided and polarized at home to even develop something to communicate much less a national strategy to guide it. To be sure, those who wish us ill have gained advantage from our domestic turmoil and feuds. But the challenges of democratic government require democratic solutions, and, across the generations, adherence to this tradition has been a wellspring of our national strength and standing in the world at-large. In our foreign strategy, furthermore, we need to be wary of our collective penchant to short-termism. The attention spans of many elected to power are too often absorbed more by domestic news, political, and legislative events than with thinking and planning long-term. Yet, by their nature, public diplomacy and strategic communications take time, experimentation, and constant labor to yield favorable outcomes. In the current geopolitical competition, we require focus in the performance of three large missions:



## *Tell the Truth*

Some say this is a post-truth age, but the struggles of peoples around the globe against repressive, corrupt, and arbitrary conditions tell us many do not want to live under venal or tyrannical rulers—or the false narratives they spin. The U.S. must tell the truth about the dangers of unconstrained state power and the everyday internal abuses and external aggressiveness of the ruling regimes of China and Russia, as well as Iran and North Korea.

In the struggle against the Soviet empire, we used overt and covert means to communicate truthfully and directly with the subject peoples behind the Iron Curtain. Eurasia's autocracies have since been busy erecting new barriers. But, unlike the Stalinist states of the past, the new digitized autocracies are betting their survival and power not only on depriving people of information, but on refashioning it wholesale. In detaching Russians from the networked world, the Kremlin has also sought to isolate them in a technologically molded info-sphere.

China's communist rulers are building the most sophisticated surveillance and

thought-control apparatus ever known—and they've been exporting their wares internationally. Beijing's resolve to dominate the construction of next-generation digital infrastructure is making its ambition of a China-run communications and informational mercantilism more of a reality. Beijing further wants to harness Artificial Intelligence to unlock unprecedented power to micro-manipulate and sculpt digitized thought-environments at home and in other countries. The operative goal, as some PRC theorists describe it, is the attainment of "Mind Dominance."

Why has the United States not been more aggressive in opposing this? We have it within our power to communicate truthfully and directly with the peoples of China and Russia. In the case of China, some believe undermining the Great Firewall is too provocative and escalatory. But given the nature and scale of the competition we're in, our operative principle should be, at minimum, reciprocity, and the establishment of informational deterrence and redlines—which protect us, our allies and partners, and third countries—is only sound policy.



## *Unmask and Discredit Disinformation*

The propaganda and disinformation of adversarial states—or the “insidious wiles of foreign influence,” as George Washington phrased it—have long been recognized as a serious threat to the constitution and security of free nations. The Kremlin’s disinformation war on the political West has backfired; a reinvigorated Atlantic Alliance has further steeled itself against the assault, although more needs to be done.

The challenge posed by China is larger. It has followed the same playbook as Russia in attempting to sow confusion and discord and to turn countries and alliances against themselves. But China has further joined its strategic media and influence instruments with other aspects of its external policy in an audacious bid to convince the world the U.S. is an unreliable ally whose power is on a downward spiral, while China is the ascendant dominant power.

The war in Europe makes clear the inherent dangers of letting autocrats believe their own propaganda. Playing defense in countering this is unwise. The U.S., by itself and in close co-ordination with allied nations, must proactively identify and then publicly unmask and discredit adversarial propaganda and disinformation. Moreover, just as it was during the Cold War, sensitizing foreign publics in contested and nonaligned countries to the propaganda and active measures of our competitors will remain a core obligation of democratic statecraft.

## *Concentrate on the Global South*

Restoring peace in Europe and maintaining it in Asia demands accelerated investment and cooperation between us and our allies. But the U.S. and other leading democracies cannot neglect the larger race for position and influence unfolding throughout the Global South—from Africa and Latin America, and from the Indian subcontinent to the South Pacific.

There, Russia is reprising its role as a spoiler, whereas China has been offering its model of political and economic governance. Whatever will come of the so-called Sino-Russian “no-limits” friendship, the reality today is the advance of one abets the advance of the other. The two autocratic powers are intent on driving a wedge between the Global North and the South. Their goal is to isolate the wealthy democracies from the demographic heart of humanity, and the U.S. has been steadily losing votes in the United Nations as a result.

Since 1945, our world strategy has been to craft a community of free nations based on rule of law and open commerce so as to prevent another large-scale war. After 1976, Sino-American rapprochement and China’s regime-controlled participation in the liberal international order were the very conditions which enabled China to lift itself out of poverty. The Chinese people must be encouraged to help developing countries do the same. But in launching its bid to enmesh other nations in a China-run order, Beijing now tells us the preservation of a free and equitable international system is not in its interest. This has

far-reaching implications for developmental outcomes and stability across the Global South, and for U.S. strategic policy.

We must inaugurate a new era of partnership between the Global South and North. Revitalized strategic communications and public diplomacy will not overcome the North's neglect or policy shortcomings. But deeper on-the-ground engagements joined with other components of American and allied power—to include the talent and resources of our businesses and civil societies—is needed to forge comprehensive compacts with the middle powers and swing states which are pivotal in the current geopolitical contest and the definition of its outcome.

## COORDINATION

One of our first tasks in Washington is fixing the regrettable proclivity in government to treat strategic communications and public diplomacy as supporting operations—a “retail” activity for after policy is made and announced. Our Cold War successes in exposing adversarial propaganda and aims or in shoring-up susceptible countries came when our engagements with foreign publics were integrated with decision-making and planning from the start. This occurred across the interagency and at the highest levels: in creating the USIA, Eisenhower appointed its director to the Cabinet and as a member of the NSC; Kennedy did the same with Edward R. Murrow, and one of Reagan's closest friends, Charles Wick, ran the USIA.

Given the scope and complexities of the current contest, over-reliance on Cabinet-level personalities is not a recipe for competitive global engagement. Presidents need empowered line staff and career professionals with a deep feel for how the competition is unfolding inside diverse countries to devise and run robust communications and public diplomacy operations. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, the State Department's top global engagement position—the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—has been vacant or held by an acting official forty percent of the time, and that vacancy rate has topped ninety percent under the last two presidents.

A still further issue is structural: our strategic communications and public diplomacy authorities and resources have been fragmented and siloed across government among fourteen separate agencies and 48 commissions. This compartmentalization makes a muddle of any effort to coordinate our worldwide strategic engagements, while heightening the risk of departments working at cross-purposes. At the end of the day, does anyone in government know fully what the rest of government is doing? What offices are responsible for thinking about the totality of the political, cultural, and informational dimensions of the competitions with China and Russia in all their complexity, and then coordinating a response on the basis of that analysis?

## *Resources and Priorities*

New appropriations are required, but a deeper issue is where to start. The State Department is the rightful home and lead authority of revived strategic communications and public diplomacy capabilities, but the department itself needs revitalization. It needs more of the most vital resources of all: the human ones. Investments across the State workforce are required so that the department and our Foreign Service have the ability to educate, backstop, and field a new generation of on-the-ground diplomats and communicators. If the past is any guide, competitive democratic engagement begins overseas at the mission-level, where American officials interact with the very foreign

governments, organizations, and individuals we need to gain the trust and support of. In short, we need to revive our global groundgame.

## *Foreign Broadcasting*

Another priority area is our government-sponsored foreign broadcasting. Content is still king, but the unchallenged dominance which American-created free media once enjoyed will not be coming back. The Kremlin and Zhongnanhai have each outspent Washington on external broadcasting and media operations by orders of magnitudes. Among other things, China has embedded its correspondents in key places, and it has forged content-sharing agreements with local news agencies and other state-run media monopolies. The net result is that reportage and opinion generated by the Chinese Communist Party is routinely consumed by audiences and cited by other outlets when it matters most—*first*. This gives Beijing an ability to silence or deflect criticism of its human rights abuses and other excesses of state power, to suppress unfavorable reporting which could impede its external ambitions, as well as a jumpstart in shaping how foreign audiences understand and respond to the world around them.

The U.S. Agency for Global Media (AGM) receives upwards of \$800 million annually from taxpayers to broadcast news internationally. AGM's grantees, including Radio Free Europe (RFE), were indispensable in the anti-Soviet struggle, and RFE, along with Radio Free Asia

and the Open Technology Fund, are operating on the frontlines of today's intensely contested media and information space. They must be empowered to do more of this—and to advance our core policy goals.

## *Innovation and Digital Communications*

For a short period after 9/11, when American media was unrivaled, the broad tendency was to try to centralize control of our communications strategy in Washington. But this never worked then and, today, given ongoing technological revolutions and the highly diffuse social media landscape, it would be a disaster. Government has been sluggish adapting to this rapidly changing environment, while China and Russia have been hard at work designing ways to infiltrate their messages into it. Today, what Washington-based leaders say matters less than empowering the right leaders abroad. Faster, agile, and more effective communications requires that Washington set policy and promote better awareness, then empowering Americans and friends overseas to run with this. Senior policymakers must foster risk tolerance and structures which enable experimentation, allow for mistakes and failure, and reward success.

## *Accountability and Efficacy*

Messaging volume and speed is one thing, but cultivating trust, changing views, or building antibodies to an adversary's propaganda is quite another. The latter requires, first, more forward-engaged communicators and public diplomats, but also hard work in addressing difficult questions. How, after all, do we know whether we are having impact on the ground?

In the Cold War, our worldwide engagement strategy was supported by a massive research and analytical apparatus. Back then, the focus was on systematically analyzing the intentions, strengths and vulnerabilities of our competitor's propaganda and influence operations, on listening to and understanding the attitudes and sentiments of foreign publics, and on assessing the opportunities we had to affect the competition in particular countries for the better. In short, the focus was on finding ways to complicate and weaken malign adversarial designs while cultivating trust and constructive relationships with the publics and leaders who could catalyze change for the better. Across government, that spirit needs to be revived and supported by deep and creative analysis—neither of which can be done without foreign immersion and learning. In all this, government does not have a monopoly on good analysis or judgment, and making our global engagement competitive again will depend, significantly, on enlisting the insight and knowledge of many outside of government.



## *Public and Cultural Diplomacy*

America's status as not just a great power but a *good* one was gained by its citizens—diplomats, soldiers, educators, businesspeople, sports teams, artists and cultural groups, and humanitarians. Our engagements around the world have always been far broader than just government-run programs, but Washington has done a poor job

of cooperating with the private sector and civil society in pursuit of policy goals. This is frequently blamed on an overly conservative interpretation of the Smith Mundt Act, which was originally intended to prevent government from propagandizing American citizens. If this really is the case, a new interpretation of the act is necessary. Either way, it is crucial that policymakers push government to experiment with ways to draw on the talent, energy, and resources of fellow citizens out of government as well as foreigners. ●

# Potential Remedies

The U.S. needs new thinking, structures, and action to compete successfully with China and Russia. We need armed forces and intelligence capabilities commensurate to the task, yes, as well as new arrangements to bolster our long-term competitiveness in the techno-economic arena. But to shore-up the embattled post-war international order and strengthen it, we must also fix the weaknesses and imbalances in our national security toolkit. What concrete actions, then, can we take to reimagine and reconstitute our strategic communications and public diplomacy tools and to integrate these with our other instruments of power to carry the argument in this new era?

The following represents a menu of options for the executive branch, Congress and the public to consider. Some of these proposals could be implemented unilaterally by the President or Secretary of State tomorrow. Others may require bureaucratic enhancements or restructuring but are meant to address issues which have hampered the development of a competitive global engagement capability. Still other options require bipartisan action in Congress to implement, and they should be a priority consideration on our national security and competitiveness agenda. ●



# Focus

Clarity on our objectives based on realistic assessments of what's possible and what's likely is needed for strategic competence. More concretely, when it comes to revitalizing our strategic communications and on-the-ground engagement tools, what are we doing—and what must we do more of to foster trust and build support among foreign publics where it matters?

## *Recommendations:*


**1)** Establish and invest in a State Advisory Board on Global Engagement.

Congress and the State Department should build on the important work of the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) so that it can fulfill its original mandate in the new era. The remit of a new, mission-focused, and resourced Advisory Board on Global Engagement would be to assist the Secretary of State in assessing major trends in the competition with China and Russia and what these mean for our efforts to constructively engage with foreign publics. Like the ACPD, the Advisory Board would contribute to strategy development, improving organizational and analytical processes, and to the conceptualization, honing, and evaluation of our worldwide engagement activities.

Members of an expanded Advisory Board should include leaders from the media, civil society, business and technology firms, and citizens with unique understanding of our competitors and the foreign countries we must engage. The Board, further, should have a research arm which can draw fully on the interagency and also enlist nongovernmental expertise in support of its work.

**2)** The State Department should coordinate with the White House to produce a Global Engagement Plan in support of the National Security Strategy and other foreign policy initiatives.

In the current geopolitical competition, what does the U.S. want to attain in this next year, in the coming five—or ten? We need to resist the proclivity to give answers which are merely aspirational and not strategic. In close coordination with the National Security Council, the State Department's annual Plan for Public Diplomacy should describe the role of strategic communications and public diplomacy in the implementation of our National Security Strategy. The report should do more than review existing programs. It should assess competitive dynamics in consequential regions and countries, lay out assumptions and theories of success, put hard targets in the ground, identify needed resources and plans to attain our goals, as well as analyze failures and successes.



**3)** Under the Secretary of State’s direction, State should develop a roadmap for strategic engagement across the Global South.

State’s newly created Office of China Coordination—the “China House”—may be the appropriate body for leading this effort. The plan should analyze the current and long-term competition and identify opportunities for fostering new and comprehensive partnerships with strategically pivotal countries.

**4)** Develop a plan to ensure free and secure communications globally.

The NSC should oversee preparation of a strategy to ensure that the U.S. and allied democracies a) harmonize policy to build open and secure communications infrastructure b) innovate alternatives to China’s digital networks which are commercially competitive in the Global South, and c) maintain the long-range capacity to communicate truthfully, directly, and ubiquitously with the peoples of every country in the world.

**5)** Develop a strategy for undermining Beijing’s Great Firewall and communicating directly and truthfully with the Chinese people.



# Optimizing Interagency Coordination

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** Confirm a State Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

President Biden nominated Elizabeth Allen for this position on January 23, 2023.

**2)** Appoint a Deputy Assistant to the President for Global Engagement.

In creating the NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications, the Biden administration has taken an important step in enhancing interagency coordination on global communications. But more is needed to ensure the White House knows what every part of government is doing to engage foreign publics. Furthermore, a top aide needs to represent the strategic communications and public diplomacy portfolio in the Situation Room and ensure this is synchronized with other aspects of policy. The objective is not to centralize control or micromanage, but to ensure that operations and budgets are meaningfully coordinated, and that all of government sings from the same sheet.

**3)** Strengthen and Enlarge State Department's Global Engagement Center.

The fight against malign propaganda and disinformation must be vigorously waged overseas. The mandate of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) is to lead all-of-government efforts to identify and counter adversarial propaganda and

disinformation aimed at "undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations." The White House and Congress should work jointly to ensure GEC has the people, resources, technology, interagency support, and bureaucratic heft it needs to perform this critical national security mission. GEC's activities should be further scaled-up so that it can play a greater role in competing with adversarial propaganda and disinformation in non-aligned countries.

**4)** The Secretary of State should prioritize integration of strategic communications and public diplomacy with USAID, humanitarian, public health, and geo-economic programs.

Our government and private overseas development and humanitarian activities have benefited many millions in the Global South, including even in hostile countries like Iran and North Korea. But taking credit must be part of our engagement strategy. If we do not defend and publicize our good works and reputation on the world stage, who will?

Furthermore, important upgrades have been made to our geo-economic tools and to enable government to play an active role in de-risking greater private sector involvements in difficult environments. But the important work of USAID, the Development Finance Corporation, among others, needs to be better coordinated on the NSC

to focus on priority countries which matter to the geopolitical competition, and this, further, needs to be integrated with State's communications and public diplomacy operations.

**5)** Congress should create the position of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategic Communications and Information Warfare.

The person in this position should oversee Defense-related communications strategy and multi-faceted information operations. The twofold rationale for this would be to a) reinforce State Department as the primary lead authority of all civilian strategic communications and public diplomacy operations and b) to ensure the Defense Department has the flexibility to deal with grey matters and coordinate military-related communications across the continuum from peace to armed conflict.

**6)** Stand up a U.S. Coordinator for Global Communications and Engagement.

An alternative possibility, which would break considerable bureaucratic crockery at State—and elsewhere in the government—would be to establish a PEPFAR-like Coordinator for Global Communications and Engagement. The person in this position would be named by the President (and sit above the Under Secretary), would report directly to the Secretary of State and to the National Security Council, and would be

empowered by the President to oversee and coordinate the strategic communications and engagement efforts of the entire executive branch to ensure integration and coherence of government messaging abroad. The cost versus benefit of such a major change would need to be weighed carefully. But the need for greater strategic and day-to-day coordination across the government and oversight of our competitive engagement innovation is critical.

# Revive our Global Engagement Groundgame

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** Congress should support—and build on—State’s Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative.

The Secretary of State should prioritize the development of a new generation of Public Diplomacy Officers inside the Foreign Service. Through the appropriations process, it is important to ensure the foundations of this staffing initiative are well-laid, and that these reflect the demands and long-range requirements of competing with China and Russia, particularly in the Global South.

**2)** The Secretary of State must empower our overseas embassies.

Washington should set policy goals, but our overseas embassies should have the primary responsibility, the operational flexibility, and the personnel and resources needed to design and implement competitive communications and public diplomacy programs which are tailored to the countries in which they operate. Resourcing should prioritize consequential geopolitical swing states, as determined by the Secretary.

Ambassadors and Public Diplomacy Officers, moreover, need to be fully supported by the interagency and authorized to be more proactive in unmasking foreign adversarial propaganda and disinformation and in communicating our message on local media outlets.

**3)** Create an attractive career path for Communications and Public Diplomacy Officers.

It is crucial for leaders at the State Department to establish that public diplomacy is every bit as important as other Foreign Service career tracks, and also that Public Diplomacy Officers are better represented in State’s higher ranks and as Chiefs of Mission. Furthermore, Public Diplomacy Officers should have unique educational and other professional incentives which reflect the special nature of their work.

**4)** Empower our forward-engaged Public Diplomacy Officers.

Successful on-the-ground engagement requires officers with the skills, knowledge, resources and support, and operational remit to join the fray and engage highly fluid and contested situations through independent action. In this, leadership in the executive branch and Congress has to be more accepting of risk. Washington needs to set policy and promote awareness, then allow our officers and diverse allies and friends overseas to run with it.

Moreover, to be effective, Public Diplomacy Officers need to develop long-term relationships in and a deep feel for the country in which they operate. Their assignments, therefore, must be longer than conventional Foreign Service tours.

# Surge Foreign Broadcasting

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** The President should invoke his special authority to “surge” AGM.

The current world-competition necessitates dramatically scaled-up—and focused—external broadcasting and digital media operations. In fact, under current law, the President has a special “surge” authority to “direct any department, agency, or other entity of the United States” to mobilize in support of AGM’s international media operations in a time of crisis—like the one we’re in. The White House should therefore develop a mission-focused plan for broadcasting which ensures congressional oversight. Among other things, the core goals should be to tell the truth about Russian and Chinese abuses of power, to deter their aggression, to expose their disinformation and other activities and aims internationally, and to communicate our message about the benefits of freedom and the real dangers of unconstrained state power in the Global South.

**2)** Enhance the Secretary of State’s ability to provide broad guidance to AGM and its grantees on broadcasting themes.

With congressional oversight, the Secretary of State should guide AGM’s media operations to

provide sustained coverage of select topics and to key audiences (for e.g., the Chinese and Russian diasporas) which are crucial to the competition. This can and must be done in ways that fully protect AGM’s essential journalistic and editorial independence.

**3)** Establish broadcasting agencies focused on sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

**4)** Empower AGM to play a greater role in supporting free and open media globally.

Ensuring free and open media is key to exposing disinformation and sensitizing foreign audiences to the propaganda of adversaries. AGM’s “free radios” employ a large number of talented professional journalists. In coordination with our embassies, they should be empowered with the resources to develop capacity building programs and partnerships with local media. If AGM’s grantees are not able to scale-up and absorb these additional responsibilities, we should develop other organizations that can.



# Enhance Accountability and Efficacy

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** Establish a dedicated Global Engagement Interagency Fusion Center.

The Secretary of State should ensure that the State-led effort to rebuild our global groundgame is fully supported by other parts of government. Among other things, an interagency fusion center should be created to a) conduct research and opportunities analysis in support of communications and public diplomacy activities worldwide and b) systematically collect and analyze reports from overseas officers and ensure

that this feedback is elevated to the Secretary of State and other principals so as to inform policy and messaging.

**2)** Expand research and evaluation.

Enlarging the research, planning, and evaluation capacity in support of State's communications and engagement programs should emphasize drawing on the knowledge and insight of our private research institutions, business, universities, and NGOs.

# Energize Digital Innovation

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** Double-down on localized content generation.

The Secretary of State should scale-up successful programs to ensure our overseas communications and engagement officers have all they need to develop partnerships with local digital content creators. Among other things, our embassies need expanded ability to hire locals and they need greater flexibility, including micro-grants, to cultivate in-country social media activists working to expose disinformation, corruption, repression, and other autocratic abuses of state power.

**2)** Flexible hiring for digital communications and technology talent.

Our private sector is awash in talent, but government's failure to attract tech-savvy younger people has become a liability to our security and competitiveness. The State Department needs the flexibility to hire those who want to serve but may not want to make this a lifelong career. Government must have the talent it needs to make its digital communication faster, nimbler, and more impactful.

# Public and Cultural Diplomacy

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** The Secretary of State should invite the heads of major U.S. philanthropies to discuss how State might best facilitate their activities abroad. The stress should be on expanding their efforts, particularly in the Global South.

**2)** State should “crowd in” talent and resources from the civil and private sector.

Working with national associations and organizations (for e.g., in higher education, the American Association of Universities and the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities), State should explore how it might encourage and promote new opportunities for their members to engage with foreign institutions and publics.

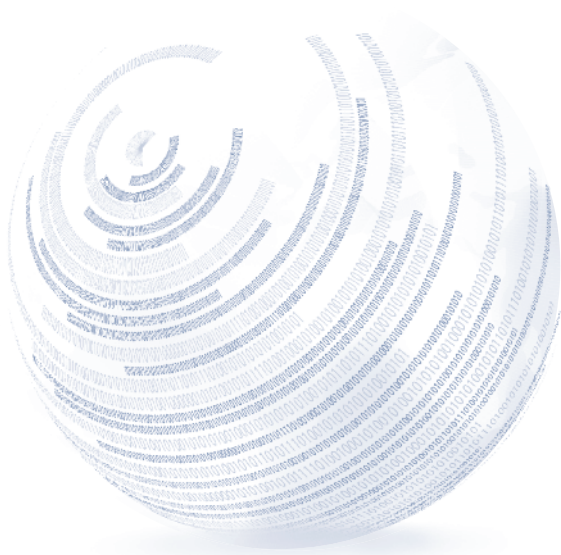
**3)** Invest more in International Education.

The United States is a world leader in higher education and the spread of American-style education abroad is a major barometer and source of our influence. Our policy and appropriations should reflect that, while also ensuring that high educational standards are kept.

Furthermore, State and congressional representatives should meet with university leaders to develop creative ways to significantly increase the number of foreign students, from the Global South especially, studying at our universities. Shared investments by government and higher education are necessary to catalyze greater reach and impact.

**4)** Establish an American Endowment for Public Diplomacy.

Operating at arm’s length from the government, the aim of the endowment should be to foster lasting relationships between Americans and select demographics from foreign countries, including students, media and legal professionals, and athletes and artists.



# Coordinate with Allies and Partners

## *Recommendations:*

**1)** Coordinate with allies to forge new compacts between the Global North and South.

Our closest allies—including the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Germany—have their own robust civilian engagement capabilities and unique competencies, and we should be better-synchronizing our worldwide engagement efforts. State’s Global Engagement Roadmap should identify the complementary lines of action and appropriations needed to enlarge this allied effort.

**2)** Establish a formal cell in the NATO Command Structure for countering propaganda and disinformation from Russia and China.

The war in Ukraine has focused the alliance, but NATO must build on this momentum and institutionalize joint efforts among its members to counter competitor propaganda and disinformation—including in Africa and Latin America.

**3)** Expand on the above with our Indo-Pacific allies and partners, including perhaps via the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

Our long-term objective must be making the world’s democracies more tightly knit, smarter, and better equipped to counter hostile disinformation and propaganda, and to coordinate our strategic engagements with countries across the Global South.

**4)** Accelerate cooperation with allied states and “like-minded” partners on the construction of open and secure digital networks.

This top diplomatic priority needs greater investment and dedicated staffing with technical expertise. Harmonization of commercial and data governance policy is required among the allies to catalyze technological innovation to compete with China and offer compelling alternatives to Beijing’s communications and informational mercantilism in the Global South. ●

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