



Refocusing U.S. Public Diplomacy for a Multipolar World

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NOVEMBER 2024

THE ISSUE

China and Russia leverage technology, social media, and big data as tools to deceptively present information for **hostile purposes**. The United States must embrace a bold approach to public diplomacy to protect the ideas, values, electoral processes, and all the elements that make a free and open society possible and prevent it from becoming a casualty in the **information war**.

FROM COLD WAR TO INFORMATION WAR: THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Discussions of U.S. public diplomacy over the last two decades are often framed around its “**failures**,” what’s “**wrong**” with it, what a “**mess**” it is, and its **diminishing returns**. The solution is not reorganizing U.S. government institutions or simply increasing congressional appropriations. Rather, it involves refocusing the collective perspective on how the U.S. government should think about public diplomacy in an era dominated by great-power competition. A comprehensive “all of the above” approach to public diplomacy is more appropriate for countering authoritarian states in the context of the Information Age.

Edmund Gullion coined the term “public diplomacy” in 1965, but deliberate engagements with international audiences had become a prominent component of U.S. peacetime foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War (see Box 1). Initial policy was focused on a bipolar world order, with the Cold War aligning nations between the United States and the Soviet Union. The goal of bipolar

public diplomacy was to “win the hearts and minds” in favor of Western values: representative democracy, free speech, religious freedom, gender equality, and capitalistic economies over the only other option—communism.

Following the end of the Cold War, the Clinton administration disbanded many of the institutions at the core of U.S. public diplomacy. The **U.S. Information Agency (USIA)**, created by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953 as an independent agency to promote U.S. values overseas through information programs, was dissolved in 1999. Many components of the USIA’s public diplomacy were transferred to the Department of State, while an indepen-

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dent Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) was tasked with overseeing international broadcasting networks like Voice of America.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks marked the re-securitization of public diplomacy as the United States **sought** to “win the hearts and minds of Muslims” across the Muslim world. Like the post-Cold War era, however, there were few media alternatives for audiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, or Somalia.

In 2018, the Trump administration rebranded the BBG as the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), an independent federal agency that oversees and broadcasts news and information about the United States and the world internationally.

The Department of State and the USAGM sought to maintain credibility with international audiences as new technologies emerged, allowing other voices to compete with U.S. efforts to promote Western norms and institutions globally.

BOX 1

WHAT IS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

A challenge in any effort to revamp public diplomacy lies in the fact that there are multiple definitions of the term and competing understandings of what activities fall under its umbrella. A traditional **understanding** of the term might only include state-to-state activities. More broadly defined, U.S. public diplomacy also encompasses official messaging from the Department of State and the White House; U.S. international broadcasting via USAGM, Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe; and other soft power tools, military operations, and covert actions.

U.S. public diplomacy today faces a fundamentally different landscape than it has ever encountered since its inception: a highly digitalized, multipolar world order where audiences can choose where they get their information and what they believe, all in the palm of their hands. Today’s **market diversification** provides audiences with many choices, including numerous countries with actively engaging foreign ministries and their state-sponsored news

networks. Audiences are no longer passive consumers of whatever is available—they get to choose where they invest their time and attention. There are fewer gatekeepers to instant information. Videos, images, and articles no longer have to pass through a newspaper editor or network producer to reach an audience. A caveat, however, is that deepfakes, propaganda, and other forms of unverified information also have direct lines to mass audiences.

This means U.S. public diplomacy must work harder than ever to showcase the superior attractiveness and value of the United States and its policies over competing alternatives. To do this, policymakers and practitioners must reframe their thinking from what public diplomacy was to what it needs to be in the coming century, which will likely be dominated by superpower competition between the United States, China, and Russia. They must refocus on multipolar public diplomacy and fill leadership voids in this space. In other words, the United States needs to reorient public diplomacy policy as a tool of relativity.

Effective public diplomacy will require appropriate levels of congressional funding and more effective use of that money. As the United States has **decreased spending** on public diplomacy, China and Russia continue to **invest heavily** in sophisticated propaganda in the developing world. The underlying goal of the U.S. effort should be not just to make the United States the most attractive and desirable country in the world but to position it as the “**partner of choice**” in competition with other vying players. Reputational security achieved through public diplomacy is undervalued, as reflected in underinvestment.

FROM VALUES TO INTERESTS IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

If the United States is to refocus its public diplomacy policy, the central purpose of multipolar public diplomacy must be building alliances. Current U.S. policy underpins the “**marketplace of ideas**,” which focuses on values and norm-building. The issue is that when the United States advocates for and institutionalizes its values, it often neglects the divergent values held by foreign audiences. **Strategic communication** is not unidirectional; it is imperative to **listen to counterparts** when shaping the United States’ image and to avoid actions that contradict the desired perception. This is why the United States continuously struggles to improve its image and reputation in the Middle East. Large majorities in nine Middle Eastern

countries **report** feeling that “the West doesn’t respect Muslim values, nor show concern for the Islamic and Muslim worlds.”

Instead, multipolar public diplomacy is **underpinned** by the “marketplace of loyalties,” which focuses on interests. In this framework, states can work together to pursue their individual and common goals despite contradicting value sets. This is illustrated by the cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II. Based on a **shared interest** in defeating Nazi Germany, two world powers vying for dominance were able to work together for a common goal that benefited both of their interests, despite disagreements on political and economic values. Likewise, the United States’ relationship with Saudi Arabia is a modern example. The two countries have markedly different value sets, yet based on mutual security, economic, and energy interests, they **work together** for mutual advantage, even in the face of starkly contrasting values and continuous tension. The killing of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 is an example of a value-based difference that tested but did not break the U.S.-Saudi relationship, which is underpinned by common geopolitical interests.

Two-way, mutually beneficial relationships that advance respective interests—not values—must drive the U.S. alliance-building for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Per **Richard Haass**, “Foreign policy is not about virtue signaling; it is about advancing interests. Prioritizing and compartmentalizing are essential.” This is not to say that the United States should give up on promoting democratic values—quite the contrary. U.S. public diplomacy needs to create **reputational security** by being genuine, authentic, and consistent. However, given the democratic backsliding over the last two decades and the rise of regimes that do not share Western values regarding universal human rights, the cost of pursuing global democratization and a liberal world order is growing exponentially. The United States’ political, social, and economic capital simply cannot afford to re-democratize the international system while also fending off power advances by China and Russia. It becomes a cost-benefit analysis, where interests offer a greater potential for cross-cultural engagement, dialogue, and cooperation than do values.

Likewise, the rise of a “post-truth” reality, **marked** by information overload and rampant disinformation, has created a social ecosystem that significantly bottlenecks the

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marketplace of ideas. The best ideas do not always rise to the top; even those that do are not always accepted as the best. At a time when the philosophical applicability of the “marketplace of ideas” is failing, the “marketplace of loyalties” offers a viable alternative. The underlying premise of refocusing U.S. public diplomacy is that this new approach focuses on making the United States the partner of choice over China or Russia, based on its superior ability to deliver on the interests of foreign audiences and governments.

THE CENTRALITY OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Information is the currency of the new world order, so to compete in a multipolar landscape, U.S. public diplomacy must be competitive in telling its narratives to the rest of the world. Technology and buy-in from tech companies are important elements in formulating a public diplomacy strategy suitable for the twenty-first century. The importance of diplomatic ties to and collaboration with tech companies is evidenced by the **soaring number** of countries that have established dedicated diplomatic missions to Silicon Valley in the San Francisco Bay Area. Luckily, the United States and its private sector already outcompete both China and Russia in technology development, so it simply comes down to leveraging the public and private resources already at play while combating adversarial attempts to **weaponize** the same technological advances. But how can technology help U.S. public diplomacy in a multipolar world order?

First, technology can provide greater internet access. The United States needs to be able to deliver its content to audiences, even in countries that control or restrict access. Therefore, technology that provides increased access is invaluable. For example, Starlink’s mobile broadband satellite system **provides** access across the African continent. Likewise, USAGM’s Open Technology Fund programs, which **provide** virtual private networks and censorship-circumvention tools, are steps in this direction. For example, the agency has worked with nthLink,

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Psiphon, and Lantern since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict in 2014 to **provide** Russians with greater access to Western media.

Second, technology can provide improved techniques for telling the United States' story. Even the most credible and authentic narratives can fail if they are not persuasive or never reach their intended audience. Leveraging new technologies to **enhance** the storytelling context of U.S. public diplomacy, elicit emotional responses, and achieve persuasive outcomes will be vital for outperforming competing narratives from China and Russia. This can range from artificial intelligence to virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, or infotainment.

Third, technology can aid in countering state-sponsored disinformation and influence operations. U.S. public diplomacy cannot operate on its own merits alone. It must leverage emerging technology to identify, track, counter, and discredit narratives and false information spread through Chinese and Russian active measures. This requires interagency cooperation through initiatives like the Department of State's **Global Engagement Center** (GEC), as well as public-private partnerships with the tech sector, like Facebook's **election integrity program**, to employ rapid alert detection networks to identify artificial amplification, deep-fakes, content coordination, etc. The European External Action Service (EEAS), for example, employs a rapid alert system to **detect disinformation and coordinate multi-state responses** through the Emergency Response Coordination Centre, EEAS Situation Room, G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, and NATO.

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE OF A REFOCUSED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

To enhance the competitive edge of U.S. public diplomacy over the next century, the conceptual focus on “foreign

audiences” should be broadened operationally to include a range of foreign actors: corporations, nongovernmental organizations, cities, diasporas, influencers, and more. The Department of State's Office of Global Partnerships is a model for **partnering** U.S. government staff and resources with nontraditional partners across business, philanthropy, and community organizations that could be mirrored within the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources (R/PPR).

Additionally, U.S. public diplomacy suffers from a lack of engagement with the domestic public. While Americans frequently see headlines about how China and Russia challenge the United States abroad, they often lack substantive knowledge of how the U.S. government is working to compete in this shifting world order. As public opinion influences both political representation and appropriations, better engaging and informing U.S. residents about the efforts and successes of public diplomacy is crucial for securing public support, congressional recruitment, and greater influence in interagency cooperation.

The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 allowed for greater transparency and access to materials intended for foreign audiences but maintained restrictions on their use for influencing domestic U.S. public opinion. Further revisions to the act should **consider** eliminating outdated policies and rethinking U.S. public diplomacy's domestic engagement strategy.

ACHIEVING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY GOALS IN THE COMING DECADES

Refocusing U.S. public diplomacy's purview requires a whole-of-government approach, interagency exercises to expose resource gaps, and designing a grand strategy that outlines responsibilities and costs associated with expanding capacity. This requires five key first steps to compete in the coming multipolar world. These span leadership, cooperation, evaluation, purpose, and training.

1. CONSISTENCY IN LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

U.S. public diplomacy has been self-sabotaged out of the gate for over 20 years by a **lack of consistent leadership**. The position of the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs (R) was vacant 44 percent of the 22 years between 1999 and 2021 (over nine and a half years), with

nine congressional appointees filling the office the other 56 percent of the time (just over 12 years). This lack of institutional continuity has prevented the development of an organized and coherent strategy for implementation across the Department of State, let alone the entire U.S. government. This inconsistency has contributed to China and Russia outperforming the United States in the information and influence domain over the last two decades. If the United States is serious about competing with China and Russia in this space, the White House must prioritize quickly filling this critical office with qualified personnel. However, given the broken Senate confirmation process, creating a role that bypasses the lengthy process would be beneficial.

That said, in the United States, the executive branch cannot bypass the legislative branch if reputational security advancements are to be achieved. If the Senate confirmation process cannot be streamlined, it is critical for congressional leadership to better address authorizations and appropriations related to public diplomacy.

In contrast, leaders like Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia can arbitrarily redirect national resources at will.

2. CENTRALITY OF LEADERSHIP IN INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

U.S. public diplomacy during the Cold War was successful because the USIA was the centralized leader of U.S. government information and influence efforts, with direct access to the White House and the National Security Council. Today, the lack of influential leadership in public diplomacy weakens the U.S. government's effectiveness in the information domain. Edward R. Murrow, the late director of the USIA, **recommended** that “public diplomacy be in at the takeoff of foreign policies, not just at the occasional crash landing.” The absence of a prominent agency leader also reduces attention from senior-level policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches.

There is no point in creating a new USIA, as that would be an unhelpful bureaucratic reorganization. However, giving the White House and the National Security Council authority over a singular organization or agency, as the USIA once had when it participated in White House cabinet and National Security Council meetings, would clarify, harmonize, and centralize U.S. government efforts, increasing the efficiency of interagency cooperation and resource allocation. Positioning the **GEC** as the dedicated central

hub, for example, would be ideal, as it is Department of State-focused but enjoys more operational cooperation and buy-in from the national security and intelligence communities than R/PPR. This would require official interagency memoranda of agreement directing other agencies and departments to be accountable to the GEC. It would also necessitate more funding—for example, liaisons to the GEC, GEC liaisons to the tech world, and additional billets within the GEC for analysts, supervisors, and possibly their own software programmers.

Another way to achieve greater impact is by doubling down on performance measurement in U.S. public diplomacy. This would allow practitioners to demonstrate its effectiveness and value as a security tool to policymakers in Congress and the White House. The work done by R/PPR's Research and Evaluation Unit is the first step in **institutionalizing performance measurements** across U.S. public diplomacy. However, it is important to stress that psychological and sociological influences are slow processes. No social science programming can yield comprehensive results in a matter of weeks, months, or even years. Policymakers need to understand that public diplomacy measurement and evaluation is a cumulative process, with trends revealing themselves over the course of years, decades, or even generations. Assessment expectations within an annual budget cycle, for example, will do little more than illustrate the fact that individual and societal influence is far from instantaneous. There must be a willingness to consider the **compounding** evidence of comprehensive mixed-methods research over time.

3. EFFICIENCY OF DOLLARS SPENT

Furthermore, the United States does not need to outspend China or Russia in this domain; instead, it must allocate resources and efforts more efficiently. Audience analysis and segmentation are **ideal methods** to achieve this. The key is to win over moderate and persuadable audiences, so the greatest resources should be focused on countries and regions not already aligned exclusively with China or Russia. This should begin with countries of strategic geopolitical interest to the United States that are being actively courted by either country. For example, Panama was one of China's first Belt and Road Initiative partners, and the influx of Chinese investments influenced the outcome of Panamanian elections and legislative votes in favor of China's economic and security priorities over those of the United

States. Similarly, the popularity of the Arabic-language RT (Russia’s international news network) has influenced public perception of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in North Africa and the Middle East.

While an in-depth strategic analysis by regional experts is required to develop a comprehensive list of countries of strategic geopolitical interest to the United States, numerous natural-mineral-rich countries in the Global South are being lobbied by both Chinese and Russian public and private sectors. Some key examples include the following:

- **Africa:** Zimbabwe (platinum group metals and lithium), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (copper, cobalt, lithium, and petroleum), Mali (iron, lead, chromium, nickel, lithium, and uranium), Guinea (iron and uranium), Mozambique (iron, titanium, graphite, and copper), South Africa (iron, platinum, manganese, and uranium), and Zambia (copper, cobalt, and platinum group metals).
- **South America:** Bolivia (petroleum), Chile (lithium and copper), Mexico (iron, copper, and zinc), Peru (iron, manganese, and copper), Jamaica (iron, copper, and zinc), the Dominican Republic (copper, nickel, and zinc), Guatemala (iron, nickel, and zinc), and Panama (access to the canal).
- **Asia:** India (iron, manganese, graphite, zinc, and copper), Uzbekistan (petroleum, uranium, copper, and zinc), Indonesia (nickel, cobalt, and copper), Kazakhstan (manganese, uranium, iron, copper, zinc, and petroleum), Kyrgyzstan (iron, manganese, petroleum, and zinc), Malaysia (iron, manganese, copper, and bauxite), and Tajikistan (iron, uranium, petroleum, and zinc).

4. PURPOSE AS INFORMER OR PERSUADER

Reinforcing institutional mission sets is also vital. The goal of U.S. public diplomacy might be compared to counter-insurgency’s **purpose** of winning the “hearts and minds” during military conflict. In the Information Age, public diplomacy should aim to build the United States’ credibility with global audiences. USAGM has spent decades cultivating a reputation for credibility with its various networks, serving as a transparent and objective news outlet. The agency needs to retain its editorial independence to remain a recognized international source of fact-based journalism.

As Nicholas J. Cull **argues**, “international broadcasting is powerful but works best at arm’s length.” This necessitates codified barriers to operational interference from the White House or Congress. Politics must stay out of USAGM for it to remain attractive to foreign audiences as a reliable source of information. On the other hand, as a central branch of the executive government, the Department of State should remain the primary tool of political advocacy in advancing the United States’ narratives to the rest of the world. The Department of State is the central hub for engaging, through various soft power means, in persuasive communication that articulates the attractiveness of U.S. policies and engagement.

5. ADVANCED TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lastly, communication is a skills-based profession, yet most foreign service officers and many public diplomacy officers are not highly trained communication practitioners. The State Department should model high-level training and strategically oriented professional development programs with academic partners, like the Defense Department’s **program** for mid-career public affairs officers (PAOs) at San Diego State University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies. This curriculum provides PAOs with advanced theoretical knowledge and practical skills in campaign planning, implementation, and measurement. It also trains PAOs to serve as strategic counselors to commanding officers.

Experienced public diplomacy officers need similar advanced training and professional development to build industry-led skill sets in campaign planning and implementation, program development, audience analysis, measurement, and evaluation, and counseling senior foreign service officers, ambassadors, and policymakers.

Options for collaboration with academia include specialized programs in public diplomacy at institutions such as the **University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism**, **Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs**, **Oklahoma State University’s School of Global Studies**, and **George Washington University’s School of Media and Public Affairs**. Another option is to pair the Foreign Service Institute and R/PPR with academic and research partners, facilitated through the Office of Global Partnerships’ **Diplomacy Lab program**.

As the U.S. government seeks to contain its adversaries' influence and geopolitical impact, it is critical to consider lessons from the twentieth century. Public diplomacy was a novel tool that helped tip the Cold War stalemate in the United States' favor. The White House and Congress must prioritize investments in public diplomacy's capacity to become a competitive tool in the international information ecosystem and reconsider what twenty-first-century public diplomacy requires for effective global strategic communications. The undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs (R) and USAGM's lack of centrality in the national security community will continue to handcuff U.S. government efforts if inaction persists. Meanwhile, the United States will watch as China and Russia continue to build alliances across the globe and fortify their legitimacy as superpowers. ■

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This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

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