

Background Research
Gates Forum I

Reputational Security: The Imperative to Reinvest in America's Strategic Communications Capabilities

Conferee Reference Materials

November, 2022



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First and foremost, on behalf of Secretary Gates, we want to thank you for attending the inaugural Gates Forum at William & Mary on U.S. strategic communications. The Forum aims to answer a single overarching question: what concrete actions can the United States take to reimagine its strategic communications capabilities in an era of intensifying great power competition?

Working together, the Forum will address this challenge that is so vital to our national interest. The intent of the Forum is to discuss and develop recommendations for action that will find broad support in the Administration and bipartisan support in Congress.

In partnership with William and Mary's Global Research Institute and outside contributors, the attached research package provides a synthesis report: Reputational Security: The Imperative to Reinvest in America's Strategic Communications Capabilities that distills insights from the following eight research papers (provided as background):

- Assessing U.S. Historical Strategic Communications: Priorities, Practices, and Lessons from the Cold War through the Present Day
- Public Diplomacy and the Road to Reputational Security: Analogue Lessons from U.S. History for a Digital Age
- Winning the Narrative: How China and Russia Wield Strategic Communications to Advance Their Goals
- China-Russia Strategic Communication: The Evolving Visions and Practices
- Autocratic Approaches to Information Manipulation: A Comparative Case Study
- A Reliable Friend and Strategic Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region: Japan's Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy
- (Re)investing in Our Reputational Security: Alternative Models and Options to Strengthen U.S. Strategic Communications
- Appendix: PEPFAR's Lessons for Reimagining and Revitalizing U.S. Strategic Communications

Based on the foundation of this high quality research, the Synthesis Report will assist conferee discussion in order to develop recommendations based on : (i) lessons learned from America's historical practice of international broadcasting and public diplomacy; (ii) assess blind spots and opportunities for the U.S. in light of the strategic communications' playbooks used by one of our closest allies, Japan, and our fiercest competitors, Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC); and (iii) weigh the relative merits of policy options to strengthen U.S. strategic communications in future. Our hope is that at a minimum, you find the time to read the Synthesis Report. We are proud of the quality research that underpins this report; therefore, we have provided all the original research papers for those who want to read more.

Secretary Gates looks forward to the expertise and contributions of each conferee as you participate, discuss, and develop recommendations in the December Forum.

Very Respectfully,

Pete Chiarelli
General, USA (Retired)
President, Gates Global Policy Center

Research Papers

Synthesis Report

1. Reputational Security: The Imperative to Reinvest in America's Strategic Communications Capabilities
2. Assessing U.S. Historical Strategic Communications: Priorities, Practices, and Lessons from the Cold War through the Present Day
3. Public Diplomacy and the Road to Reputational Security: Analogue Lessons from US History for a Digital Age
4. Winning the Narrative: How China and Russia Wield Strategic Communications to Advance Their Goals
5. China-Russia Strategic Communications: Evolving Visions and Practices
6. Autocratic Approaches to Information Manipulation: A Comparative Case Study
7. A Reliable Friend and Strategic Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region: Japan's Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy
8. (Re)investing in Our Reputational Security: Alternative Models and Options Strengthen U.S. Strategic Communications

Synthesis Report Gates Forum I

Reputational Security: The Imperative to Reinvest in America's Strategic Communications Capabilities

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1. Introduction

The December 2022 Gates Forum aims to answer a single overarching question: *what concrete actions can the United States take to reimagine its strategic communications capabilities in an era of intensifying great power competition with China and Russia?*

This top-line synthesis report distills insights from seven background papers (Box 1)¹ prepared for the Forum to help conferees: (i) assess lessons learned from America’s historical practice of international broadcasting and public diplomacy; (ii) understand blindspots and opportunities for the U.S. in light of the strategic communications’ playbooks used by one of our closest allies, Japan, and our fiercest competitors, Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC); and (iii) weigh the relative merits of policy options to strengthen U.S. strategic communications in future.

Defining the Strategic Challenge in 10 Key Messages:

- Reputational security is about investing in a better image, while promoting a better reality—it is as critical now in an age of great power competition as it was in the World Wars and the Cold War.
- The U.S. has let our strategic communications capabilities atrophy at a time when we need them most to compete and win in a “contest for the future of our world” (NSS, 2022).
- Effective strategic communication is not unidirectional—it combines pushing out information about who you are and what you value with listening to understand counterparts.
- Reputational security requires cultivating strategic patience, employing tools that may take some time to pay off, and deciding where to make investments that are consistent, predictable, and serve long-term goals.
- Beijing’s and Moscow’s strategic communications may or may not be coordinated, but more importantly, they are reinforcing and compounding in ways that threaten U.S. interests.

¹ The background papers benefited from inputs from Austin Baehr (AidData/W&M), Jessica Brandt (Brookings), Eric Brown (GGPC), Bryan Burgess (AidData/W&M), Nick Cull (University of Southern California), Emily Dumont (AidData/W&M), Amber Hutchinson (AidData/W&M), Divya Mathew (AidData/W&M), Maria Repnikova (University of Georgia), and Nancy Snow (Schwarzman College, Tsinghua University)

- The U.S. is underinvesting in strategic communications in the Global South and with diaspora communities compared to its competitors, which are growing sources of public opinion vulnerability.
- Don't go dollar for dollar in outspending the PRC and Kremlin on broadcasting; engage asymmetrically by undercutting the ability to borrow local credibility.
- Take a page out of the competitor's playbook: synchronize broadcasting and public diplomacy along with other instruments of power to emphasize mutually reinforcing themes.
- To compete with authoritarian challengers, the U.S. needs a strategy rooted in democratic values, requiring action within and beyond the information domain.
- America should not go it alone—we are stronger when we invest in the collective reputational security of partners and allies, helping them build resilience and reduce vulnerability to malign influence.

Box 1. December 2022 Gates Forum Background Papers In Your Information Packet

Paper 1. Assessing U.S. Historical Strategic Communications: Priorities, Practices, and Lessons from the Cold War through the Present Day (Custer et al., 2022a). Looks at how America's international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been resourced, organized, coordinated, and targeted across the three periods: the Cold War (1946-1990), the post-Cold War and 9/11 period (1991-2007), and the contemporary era (2008-2022).

Paper 2. Public Diplomacy and the Road to Reputational Security: Analogue Lessons from U.S. History for a Digital Age (Cull, 2022). Introduces reputational security as a component of national defense, drawing operational lessons from U.S. public diplomacy during the Cold War and the work of the U.S. Information Agency.

Paper 3a. Winning the Narrative: How China and Russia Wield Strategic Communications to Advance Their Goals (Custer et al., 2022b). Examines which tools Beijing and Moscow use with whom, how, and with what results. Assesses blindspots, comparative advantages, and entry points for the U.S. to win the narrative.

Paper 3b. China-Russia Strategic Communications: Evolving Visions and Practices (Repnikova, 2022). Examines the PRC's and Russia's state-led strategic communication objectives and practices, including how these goals have evolved over time, priority target audiences, strategies, and implementation.

Paper 4. Autocratic Approaches to Information Manipulation: A Comparative Case Study (Brandt, 2022). Explores how Russia and the PRC use technology to advance strategic communications and public diplomacy that impacts U.S. interests, describing the tools and tactics of authoritarian regimes, primary narratives, and policy responses.

Paper 5. A Reliable Friend and Strategic Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region: Japan's Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy (Snow, 2022). Describes Japan's approach to strategic communications, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats for the Japan-U.S. alliance to counter a rising PRC.

Paper 6. (Re)investing in Our Reputational Security: Alternative Models and Options to Strengthen U.S. Strategic Communications (Custer, 2022c with E. Brown). Introduces six pain points to describe the distance between the current reality and our desired future, proposing possible options to strengthen U.S. strategic communications.

2. Defining the Strategic Challenge

Reputational security is about investing in a better image, while promoting a better reality—it is as critical in an age of great power competition as in the World Wars and the Cold War.

Strategic communications is fundamental to national security. How America is perceived internationally affects its ability to mobilize allies, convince skeptics, and counter the narratives of those who seek to undermine it. Reputation building is partly an offensive strategy—telling effective stories about who a state is and what it wants abroad, while building a society that others admire at home (Cull, 2022). But there is also a defensive dimension—working to be understood “to avoid what you do not want” and retaining the advantage in a competitive information environment (ibid).

The world in 2022 is a time of great threats and opportunities for our reputational security. “Adversaries large and small seek to increase their own standing while diminishing that of the U.S., its allies, and the values for which we stand” (Cull, 2022). Reputation has become “central to an international struggle” for primacy and global leadership in the world (ibid)—as an end in and of itself, as well as a means to broader economic, security, and geopolitical ends. America faces highly “capable competitors” (Brandt, 2022), as Russia and the PRC wield expansive state-directed strategic communications efforts to assail America’s reputation and ensure their story wins over foreign leaders and publics.

The rise of new technologies and platforms has dramatically altered how citizens and leaders source information, share their views, and form narratives about themselves, others, and the world around them. This creates unprecedented opportunities to communicate with people nearly anywhere, anytime, and in multiple ways; however, this connectivity comes with vulnerabilities to surveillance, censorship, disinformation, and manipulation that can corrode personal freedoms and disrupt entire societies. Navigating this brave new world requires an agility and sophistication with digital tools that U.S. strategic communications often lacks: exploiting new communications channels and tactics to tell America’s story, while anticipating and responding to threats that compromise America’s reputation, the health of our information ecosystem, as well as the rights of individuals and the functioning of societies around the world.

The U.S. has let our strategic communications capabilities atrophy at a time when we need them most to compete and win in a “contest for the future of our world” (NSS, 2022).

The U.S. is its own worst enemy for failing to invest in core capabilities to amplify preferred messages, cultivate shared norms, and forge common bonds with foreign counterparts to advance mutual interests. Leadership, resourcing, coordination, and accountability are critical to success, but America is failing on all these fronts and has been for some time. Our competitors have demonstrated an enthusiasm and adeptness for quickly turning the digital world to their advantage, but the U.S. has been slow to adapt (Brandt, 2022). “Responses have been reactive and siloed,” rather than proactive

and integrated, and they have not been making effective use of private sector and civil society partners that could be dynamic collaborators (ibid).

America's strategic communications has been strongest when senior White House and congressional leaders are interested in its success, can articulate how this advances U.S. foreign policy goals and national interests, and follow through in endowing capable deputies with authorities, resources, and access to operationalize this vision in day-to-day operations. Strategic communications efforts falter when these critical ingredients are missing. Moreover, the absence of strategic communications within national security and foreign policy decision-making increases the vulnerability of a disconnect between what America says with its broadcasting and public diplomacy and what it does in policy and practice.

The Cold War was the high point in alignment between what U.S. political leaders said they wanted to achieve (counter the USSR's influence) and their follow-through in mobilizing resources and political attention to operationalize these goals in practice. International broadcasting and public diplomacy commanded relatively higher shares of the international affairs budget and federal spending at this time than today. Interagency coordination was aided by close working relationships between the director of the USIA and the White House, a single animating purpose, and the President's personal involvement.

The post-Cold War period was marked by consolidation and fragmentation. Broadcasting entities were merged, governing structures dissolved, and legacy outlets privatized to cut costs. Leaders encouraged a proliferation of activities targeting a broader range of topics and audiences. Strategic communications became overstretched, under-resourced, and unfocused. The 9/11 attacks changed the landscape and stoked introspection on how these events could happen. Financing increased, but not to Cold War levels. Coordination committees and national strategies were formed, but their effectiveness was uncertain.

The disconnect between what America says it wants to achieve and its revealed priorities is most acute in the modern era. Financing levels have continually declined over the last several decades as a share of the international affairs budget and federal discretionary spending, even as priorities have become more diffuse and competitors more assertive. In 2020, the U.S. budgeted 3 cents on strategic communications for

every 100 federal dollars spent (constant USD 2021); broadcasting and public diplomacy command less than 7 percent of the State Department's budget.

Senior leaders are needed to articulate and communicate a compelling vision for change, marshal the human and financial resources to see that vision become reality, and hold all parties accountable for results. However, the position of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has been vacant for 40 percent of the time since its inception (Cull, 2022). Without clear goals or common success metrics, there is little accountability to ensure resources are being allocated in ways that reward results and innovation rather than funding what we have done before, without consideration of whether we are making the best use of the limited funds available.

Until recently, U.S. public diplomacy professionals were operating within organizational structures and job descriptions designed for the analog world of the Cold War rather than the digital world we now live in today. We continue to invest heavily and resist reductions in areas such as short-wave radio consumption, which is declining in most parts of the world. A proliferation of actors across multiple agencies, bureaus, and departments are involved in strategic communications, but coordination mechanisms are short-lived and ineffective, increasing the risk that these efforts are working at cross purposes that inadvertently impede or undercut each other's efforts.

Effective strategic communications is not unidirectional—it combines pushing out information about who you are and what you value with listening to understand counterparts.

U.S. strategic communications is only as successful as its ability to change the attitudes or behaviors of foreign publics and leaders in ways that advance America's national interests. This is easier said than done, since we have more control over the supply-side inputs (i.e., the number of broadcasting hours or exchange participants) than how target audiences respond. U.S. strategic communications has been at its strongest when we have put in the spadework to listen and understand where an audience is coming from, draw connections between what they value and what we care about, and combine the push of messaging with the pull of relationship-building to close the gap and advance our interests.

Foreign publics have responded positively to U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy when overtures were authentic and truthful in talking about difficulties America faced—from civil rights unrest to the Watergate scandals—rather than sweeping political topics under the proverbial rug. They accepted and admired the U.S. for acknowledging our faults and following through on our values. However, there is less tolerance for inconsistency between America’s rhetoric and action. High levels of public discontent over Vietnam were less a reaction to specific coverage than perceived hypocrisy between America’s stated values and its actions in the war. In the 9/11 period, U.S. leaders’ hard sell of a highly curated Brand America created pushback for failing to address root sources of discontent in the U.S. relationship with the Arab and Muslim world. Protecting America’s reputational security is “not just about putting out the best image, but addressing the parts of our reality that undermine our position in the world” (Cull, 2022).

The boundaries of policymaking are even more porous today, where decisions in one dimension of foreign policy can easily affect outcomes in another. Higher rates of disapproval towards the U.S. in recent years may be a reaction to intensified competition rhetoric, as countries disliked being forced to pick sides, given the timing and similar reactions to the PRC as well (Horigoshi et al., 2022). Similarly, there is an apparent splintering between member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative, which tend to be more positive towards the PRC, versus holdouts that are generally closer aligned with the U.S. (ibid).

Local knowledge, from listening to what foreign publics care about, is critical to feed into content and programming that resonates with audiences (Cull, 2022). This includes monitoring socio-political trends within target countries, conducting audience analysis and tracking shifts in public opinion to ensure programming is hitting the mark. Countering disinformation also requires listening to understand how false rumors are spread, monitoring falsehoods, exposing adversaries’ gambits, rebuilding trust, and promoting an alternate vision that counters assumptions (ibid).

Foreign service officers and local staff have always been a key ingredient of U.S. public diplomacy (Cull, 2022); however, this frontline cadre has atrophied. Recruiting, training, and retaining top-tier talent to staff critical broadcasting and public diplomacy roles have proven difficult, given the existence of legacy structures and the tendency to deprioritize professional development and career advancement for these tracks relative

to other specialties. There is also a need to upgrade these roles to navigate the unprecedented threats and opportunities posed by a digital world and more assertive competitors.

Reputational security requires cultivating strategic patience, employing tools that take time to pay off, and deciding where to make investments that are consistent, predictable, and serve long-term goals.

Broadcasting and public diplomacy work on different timescales, which creates difficulties in setting expectations and managing disparate activities (Cull, 2022). Education and cultural exchange programs are effective in changing attitudes but may take generations to bear fruit. Training future and current leaders can influence the norms and policies of counterpart countries. Professionals trained in the U.S. can become advocates for beneficial reforms, from free trade to civic participation in governance. If participation is a proxy, there is a strong demand signal for these opportunities: 250,000 students annually receive visas to study in the U.S., and 160,000 students have participated in the Fulbright program since the Cold War. But enrollments have been declining even before COVID-19, due to visa restrictions, the political climate, the attraction of other study abroad destinations, and financial costs.

Whereas public diplomacy programs build deep and lasting relationships with a fairly narrow set of actors, broadcasting goes wide with the capacity to reach millions of people quickly but at relative arms length. Two U.S. broadcasters have steadily grown their consumer base over the last decade: the global flagship Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA), with audiences reaching over 300 million and 60 million respectively in 2021. Comparatively, other surrogate networks held steady but did not radically change in audience size. Yet, broadcasting must overcome other hurdles to meet their objectives.

Target audiences must consider content to be credible and trustworthy for it to influence their behavior. On this score, audience surveys indicate that the majority of those who consume U.S. international broadcasting felt the coverage was credible and that it improved their understanding of the United States, but there has been a decline since 2015. This waning confidence could be a reaction to the broadcasters' content, in

light of concerns of heightened political interference, or reflect more general perceptions of U.S. foreign policies.

Broadcasters have attracted high praise from former Communist bloc countries for their role in “bringing a peaceful end to the Cold War and ushering in a new era of freedom” (Pomar, 2021). Other successes include the efforts of the USIA to expose Soviet disinformation and convince Western European audiences of the USSR’s duplicity; President Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace campaign; and President Reagan’s efforts to reduce European opposition to intermediate nuclear weapons (Cull, 2022). Of course, even when specific initiatives are popular with target audiences, they may still be ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviors about the United States. Radio Sawa is the most obvious example: launched in 2002 with a budget of US\$35 million, the station attracted a large audience of Arab youth under 30 with a mix of Western and Arabic pop music alongside newscasts but ultimately failed to achieve its objective to spur dialogue with Arab youth to promote democracy and improve perceptions of the U.S. (Zaharna, 2010).

Beijing’s and Moscow’s strategic communications may or may not be coordinated, but more importantly, they are reinforcing and compounding in ways that threaten U.S. interests.

We live in a time of contested narratives: economic coercion versus mutual benefit; self-determination versus disregarding the international order; promoting freedom versus forcing others to surrender their sovereignty. More than empty words, these narratives jockey for position within traditional and social media, in public and private discourse, between great powers, and within third countries. They are the currency of a “persistent asymmetric competition” that the U.S. finds itself engaged in with authoritarian challengers who aim to weaken rivals, win friends and allies, and shore up power at home (Brandt, 2022).

America’s closest competitors, Russia and the PRC, have similarities and differences in what drives their strategic communications, as well as how they operationalize these objectives in practice. Regime survival is a common theme. Even as they communicate with foreign publics, Moscow and Beijing seek to strengthen their domestic legitimacy

at home (Repnikova, 2022) and care about regaining international respect following the loss of the Soviet Union and a century of humiliation, respectively. Both see the West, particularly the United States, and Western media as hostile to their interests and seek to take back control of the narrative (ibid). Geopolitically, Russia has a more singular focus: trafficking in anti-Western narratives as part of its revisionist foreign policy and preserving Eurasia as its unique zone of control. The PRC adopts a dual strategy of rebuking Western conceptions of human rights and norms while selling alternative narratives that are more conducive to advancing its interests (ibid). Each also recognizes that controlling the narrative offers leverage to advance other economic and security goals.

In some respects, Moscow's and Beijing's narratives are mutually beneficial to their interests, even when they are not directly coordinated. For example, the Kremlin's efforts to undermine Western governments and institutions give the PRC an opening to "propose its own economic and governance model as an attractive alternative" (Brandt, 2022). Moreover, if Russia is able to exploit social cleavages in ways that weaken its competitors by "leaving them distracted and divided," this benefits Beijing as much or more than Moscow by removing resistance to the PRC's charm offensive (ibid). On the flip side, when Beijing picks up and amplifies the Kremlin's propaganda (as in the case of COVID-19 related disinformation), this offers a fig leaf of "legitimacy to Moscow's...claims. The combined result of all of this activity is to erode international human rights norms regarding privacy and the freedoms of expression and thought" (ibid).

Of course, neither are Moscow and Beijing monolithic in their motives and goals. Their differences are perhaps even more clearly seen in what they choose not to say or do. Notably, Russia typically refrains from endorsing the PRC's One China policy or in supporting its economic and soft power overtures in the Global South (Repnikova, 2022). The PRC, meanwhile, maintains a posture of strategic ambiguity on Russia's invasion of Ukraine—neither endorsing nor rebuking its ally—and it does not typically amplify the Kremlin's claims that it is the defender of conservative values in the face of the West's corruptive promotion of secularism and liberalism (ibid). In a certain respect, surfacing and highlighting their differences could be of benefit for U.S. strategic communications, as it raises "questions about the extent of their alliance and exposes their distinct geo-political agendas" (ibid).

Don't go dollar for dollar in outspending the PRC and Kremlin on broadcasting; engage asymmetrically by undercutting the ability to borrow local credibility.

PRC state-run media is a global enterprise: there is not a single country on earth that is not reached by one or more of its channels. Xinhua has the largest global footprint, with 177 branches across 142 countries. People's Daily operates 40 branches spanning 6 continents, and China News Service is in fifteen countries, primarily targeting G20 member countries or regional powers. The PRC distributes China Daily in 27 countries, while other outlets have online websites with customized content in the official languages and popular languages of its target countries. It has invested in radio and television capabilities with 21 FM and AM radio stations around the world; short wave transmitters in mainland China, Cuba, and Mali; and CCTV/CGTN channels available via satellite in every country.

Among the Kremlin's globally-focused media outlets, TASS operates 63 news bureaus in 60 countries. RT has the most extensive distribution network with 22 satellites, over 230 operators, and a subsidiary, Ruptly, which focuses on multi-media content largely aimed for social media consumption. Sputnik broadcasts via terrestrial radio as well as its website, using 25 multimedia centers around the world to produce and distribute content in 30 languages. Primarily Russian-language outlets (Channel One, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, RT, Russia 1, Russia 24, Russia K, RTR-Planeta) have a circumscribed geographic reach within the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, but the sheer number of these channels and their ubiquity is potentially powerful in dominating the information space.

While formidable, the greater risk to U.S. interests is not necessarily the official broadcasting operations of its competitors, which target audiences recognize as propaganda and discount their credibility accordingly. Instead, it is the ability of Beijing and Moscow to borrow local credibility through cooperation agreements, ownership stakes, and training/exchange programs with media outlets and journalists in other countries that is potentially more problematic. These pathways of influence are insidious because they are more difficult to track due to the opacity of the PRC and the Kremlin regarding their own activities; a lack of legislation within recipient countries that require

transparent disclosure of content sources and outlet ownership; and less well-developed journalistic standards and training in many recipient countries.

Beijing has brokered 429 known content sharing partnerships (CSPs) between Chinese state-media and counterpart media outlets within target countries to reprint, share or co-create content. These CSPs involve media of all types—print, radio, television, digital—and incorporate a wide range of 36 PRC media outlets at national and local levels. The PRC's partnerships are heavily weighted towards high-volume trading partners, geostrategically important countries, or those with moderate to sizable Chinese diaspora communities. In practice, CSPs provide Beijing with a pass-through for PRC narratives to directly infuse domestic media coverage with minimal intermediation, while citizens who consume local news are oblivious to the fact that they are effectively consuming the CCP's propaganda.

Beijing's journalist exchange programs build rapport with individual journalists in the hope that they view China more favorably and that this translates into more positive coverage when they return to their home countries. Access to officials, credentials to cover important events, and visas to visit China are also important currencies for media outlets to produce compelling news stories. This creates levers of control for Beijing when it comes to approving or denying applications for new or renewal visas, requests for press credentials to cover events, and access to Chinese officials for interviews or comments.

The Kremlin employs several similar mechanisms, signing 50 cooperation agreements in 39 countries between 2015 and 2019 to piggyback on the existing audiences of domestic media outlets to distribute its narratives (Bugayova and Barros, 2020). Agreements are most often related to content or information sharing. Some reference joint projects and training for local journalists, while others cast their goals in more philosophical terms: eliminating "Western media bias in presenting international information" or creating a "unified fact-checking platform...to counter the dissemination of false information" (ibid).

Less visible are the Kremlin's efforts to co-opt the governance of counterpart media outlets—buying up ownership shares or cultivating ties with other owners—in ways that have the potential to shape both what is covered and how. Vulnerability is highest for countries with small media markets, few alternative sources of information, high

concentration of media in the hands of few elites, and low transparency about who owns the media (Dumont et al., 2022). These attributes characterize several countries in Russia's backyard—namely, Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine before the February 2022 invasion—where the Kremlin had deeply penetrated and compromised media markets, as many of the most-consumed outlets were either directly Russian-owned or had owners with known or suspected ties with the Kremlin or Russian oligarchs through professional and personal connections.

The U.S. is underinvesting in the Global South and with diasporic communities compared to its competitors, which are growing sources of public opinion vulnerability.

Africa is an up-and-coming area of interest for both the PRC and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The PRC attracts more favorable citizen views in Africa because of its economic importance to the continent (amplified by its strategic communications); Russia does as well, to a lesser extent (Repnikova, 2022). Similarly, African leaders from 55 countries and regions said they preferred China's development model to that of the U.S. (Horigoshi et al., 2022), though Russia garnered the least favorable views of all. Russian state media content is also surprisingly popular in Latin America: two of the top five of Russian state media's most frequently retweeted accounts on Twitter were in Spanish, and RT in Spanish had more followers than its English account (Brandt, 2022). Notably, President Putin has "assiduously courted leaders in the [LAC] region in an effort to build political support" during the midst of the Ukraine crisis (ibid). Yet, Africa and Latin America are relative afterthoughts in America's own strategic communications, both as a share of financing and as a congressional priority. This is a missed opportunity and an emerging vulnerability.

Both the PRC and Russia devote a substantial share of attention towards the Chinese and Russian diasporas overseas—they enjoy virtual monopolies in local language content, as well as a series of education and cultural exchange activities. That said, their relative emphases are somewhat different. The PRC mobilizes overseas Chinese to support its policy positions and present a more favorable face of China to the mainstream population in their countries. The Kremlin stokes discontent among Russian language speaking minorities to drive a wedge between them and national authorities in their countries. For example, prior to the 2022 invasion, there was a Russian language

and cultural center in each of Ukraine's eastern oblasts and three centers each in Georgia's disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin supported 710 cooperative efforts with formal non-governmental organizations, informal community groups (e.g., Orthodox churches, Russian compatriot unions), think tanks, and schools in Eurasia to produce cultural events and educational programming. The most favored recipients included several disputed territories: South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, Republika Srpska, and Donbas.

Take a page out of the competitor's playbook: synchronize broadcasting and public diplomacy along with other instruments of power to emphasize mutually reinforcing themes.

The PRC and the Kremlin are intentional and systematic in looking for coherence and consistency across two streams of their strategic communications: broadcasting and education/cultural exchange. Yet, that degree of coherence does not appear to be the case for U.S. strategic communications, given the extent of interagency coordination challenges.

A consistent thread for Beijing across its broadcasting and exchange activities is to redefine international norms on human rights: emphasizing collective over individual rights and economic over political rights. It raises up the PRC's development model as one to which other countries can aspire, promoting Beijing as a good neighbor and a responsible global leader interested in win-win solutions and working together as part of a community of common destiny. These common refrains in the PRC's state-run media and senior leader communications are reinforced by its education and exchange programs which train journalists, law enforcement, border patrol agents, justice officials, and future leaders, among other key demographics.

The most powerful combination of instruments in Beijing's toolkit is how it exploits natural synergies between its broadcasting, public diplomacy, and economic power. The PRC's economic importance is the most often cited reason why leaders in low- and middle-income countries say they view Beijing favorably or as having influence over their priorities (Custer et al., 2021a, 2021b). This subjective perception is based on objective fact, for the PRC is now the world's largest financier of overseas development projects (Malik et al., 2021), the world's largest official creditor (Horn et al., 2019), and the number one trading partner for 70 percent of the world's countries. Beijing amplifies

this narrative by ensuring that its economic assistance is highly publicized by its state-run media and that its Confucius Institutes and Classrooms reinforce the appeal of learning Mandarin and studying in China as a gateway to economic opportunity.

Of course, just as multiple tools can work together they can also undercut each other, and this is very much true for the PRC. Beijing's assertiveness in projecting strength via reconnaissance aircraft and civilian fishing boats to assert maritime claims in the South China Sea, for example, does send a powerful signal, but arguably not one that wins it very many friends (Custer et al., 2018). The strong association in people's minds between China and the Belt and Road Initiative has proven to be a double-edged sword, making Beijing vulnerable to accusations of encouraging irresponsible borrowing and worsening corruption within partner countries (Horigoshi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, its heavy-handedness in mobilizing overseas Chinese students to promote China and curbing the independence of journalists has generated both attention and pushback.

Comparatively, Russia has placed less emphasis on its appeal as offering economic opportunities for other countries, though that has been true on a more limited basis in its promotion of the Eurasian Union and Eurasian integration more generally. The Kremlin has used strategic communications and its position as an energy power to shore up its economic importance in its near abroad, and many of its neighbors still rely heavily on remittance flows from family members working in Russia. Nevertheless, more of Russia's efforts build upon pre-existing language and cultural ties with post-Soviet states, as well as appeal to shared values (anti-Westernism, conservatism) with foreign publics farther afield.

Noticeably, Russia's state-run media reinforce emphases seen in its education and cultural cooperation activities. In an in-depth analysis of TASS and Sputnik coverage, Custer et al. (2022d) found that nationalist and far-right groups were frequently mentioned, in order to heighten anxiety about rampant neo-Nazism in ways that complemented the Kremlin's educational programming featuring its role in fighting Nazi Germany in the second World War. Russian media raised the profile of Eurosceptic parties, Orthodox churches, and pro-Kremlin institutions—consistent with its education/cultural cooperation with these actors—while discrediting pro-European parties and organizations. Stories positioned Russia's actions in Donbas or Crimea, as well as Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, as examples of the Kremlin serving as a natural security partner, in line with its emphasis on youth patriotic education.

Russian media coverage and cooperation efforts have sought to increase the credibility and capacity of local authorities and civic actors in breakaway regions to assert autonomy and align with Moscow.

To compete with authoritarian challengers, the U.S. needs a strategy rooted in democratic values, requiring action within and beyond the information domain.

One of the challenges for the U.S. in competing with authoritarian actors has been their use of disinformation and digital harassment to shape public opinion. Artificial intelligence and other digital technologies make it easier for states to couple automated bots with human curation to flood the information environment with false or sensationalized information. Human trolls and automated bots can present a false front (i.e., not revealing the identity of the individual behind the account). However, official channels may intentionally pick up stories manufactured by trolls to boost their signal, while troll farms and bots may do the same to amplify official efforts via alternate channels. Flooding the physical and digital air waves with their preferred stories (Schleibs et al., 2020) allows authoritarian challengers to create a “firehose of falsehood” (Polyakova and Boyer, 2018), pushing out false or sensationalized information at a volume and velocity that is hard to control or counter, especially when tied into broader strategies such as “exploiting search engine results” and “trafficking in conspiracies” (Brandt, 2022).

On the surface, authoritarian regimes are at a relative advantage in this environment, as “illiberal leaders benefit from widespread skepticism” which feeds “polarization and division...weakening democratic societies from within” (Brandt, 2021a). Yet, there are opportunities for the U.S. and fellow democracies to leverage the unique attributes of open societies as a source of resilience rather than vulnerability. There is a “first mover advantage” to mobilize investigative journalists and open-source researchers to surface and discredit deceptive information (Brandt, 2022). As an electoral democracy, U.S. leaders are not as vulnerable to concerns of regime survival and can be more candid and willing to discuss America’s flaws and mistakes, embracing the value of a free media and robust civil society to provoke social dialogue and ensure political accountability (ibid). The relative economic importance of the U.S. within the international finance system provides another lever to curb information manipulation, by using targeted

financial sanctions against individuals and outlets associated with disinformation campaigns (ibid).

America should not go it alone—we are stronger when we invest in the collective reputational security of partners and allies, helping others build resilience and reduce vulnerability to malign influence.

A unique strength of America is our close partnerships with allies that share our values, including fellow democracies interested in protecting free and open societies and alumni networks of past U.S. public diplomacy programs who value good relations with the United States. Japan is an example of this, as Tokyo and Washington share concerns that the PRC's intentions to create a "Sino-centric order" represent a threat to universal human rights and liberal-international norms (Snow, 2022). Japan has the privilege of being "both a trusted bilateral partner to the United States, and the most trusted extra-regional nation in Southeast Asia" (ibid). Respected for its ability to listen and attract others with soft power, Japan is a safe "third option" that does not require its partners to choose sides, unlike the U.S. and the PRC (ibid). Tokyo offers many attributes to a partnership that the U.S. would lack on its own: geographic proximity, a reputation for altruism and goodwill, and credibility as a somewhat independent actor.

Nevertheless, America more often goes it alone in its strategic communications, rather than intentionally pooling resources with allies. This short-sightedness makes it difficult to share the cost of producing and distributing broadcasting content that advances shared values, builds resilience among societies to maintain a plurality of views, and identifies and counters disinformation. If the value proposition of U.S. exchange programs is to build relationships and mutual understanding that lasts generations, but we do not effectively mobilize alumni long after their participation in these programs, then America is not being a good steward of these resources. Moreover, a facet of reputational security is "helping others eliminate their own vulnerabilities" to malign influence, through promoting the "mutual benefit derived from credible media and resilient stable societies around the world" (Cull, 2022).

Even closer to home, there are untapped opportunities to leverage a second unique strength: the vibrancy of America's free and open society with all of its messiness. Universities, private sector companies, non-government media outlets, celebrities, and

civic groups are unpredictable, but as they engage with foreign publics and leaders, they become part of U.S. strategic communications efforts whether planned or not. Rather than trying to control or constrain these efforts, America's strategic communications efforts will be stronger if we are able to mobilize and partner with these actors to crowd-in their expertise, support, and operational capacity in areas of common interest.

Yet, legislative restrictions inhibit America's ability to cultivate a strong domestic constituency to advance U.S. reputational security. A 1972 revision to the Smith-Mundt Act (with the good intention of protecting the American people from being propagandized by their own government) separated foreign and domestic strategic communications, but with the unintended consequence of hurting the ability of the agencies tasked with these activities from engaging with the U.S. public to build their awareness, leverage their capabilities, or ensure that the government's efforts are transparent and accountable.

3. Pain Points and Policy Options

Six pain points hamper U.S. strategic communications in ways that undermine America's reputational security: (i) lack of political and technical leadership; (ii) insufficient resources and poor prioritization; (iii) toothless coordination across diffuse operations; (iv) broken feedback loops between supply and demand; (v) the approach of going it alone, rather than crowding in support from partners and allies; and (vi) a multipolar world replete with new opportunities and challenges.

The following provides a starter set of possible options and recommendations for Forum participants to consider and discuss in addressing the six pain points. The options obviously are not mutually exclusive and more ideas and options are welcome.

The options are organized into two buckets: (i) structural changes to improve leadership, coordination, and/or capacity; and (ii) operational changes to increase coherence, alignment, and results. The ordering of options within each bucket does not reflect a relative preference or the merits of these ideas, but rather the likely level of difficulty in execution from least to greatest.

3.1 Structural Changes to Improve Leadership, Coordination and/or Capacity

Option 3.1.1 Create a new White House policy czar or envoy with the authority and resources to take a comprehensive approach to strengthening U.S. reputational security from various angles.

The presidentially-appointed Cabinet-level position would lead the administration's efforts to improve foreign public perceptions of the United States as a preferred partner, responsible global leader, dependable ally, and model democracy. The envoy would be supported by a small support Office of Reputational Security with a working budget and staff, though on a smaller scale than an agency or sub-agency. The envoy would be tasked with developing a multi-faceted strategic communications plan that is responsive to the 2022 National Security Strategy, as well as marshaling resources and partners to implement said strategy, reporting on progress to the President.

Option 3.1.2 Create a PEPFAR-like Office of the Global Coordinator of U.S. Reputational Security at the State Department.

The Office of the U.S. Global Coordinator for Reputational Security would report to the Secretary of State with the seal of approval of the President and would be vested with substantial resources and far-reaching authority by Congress to drive innovation, improve coordination, and provide leadership (Brown, 2022). The inspiration for this approach would be the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator who heads up the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), to which Congress appropriates the bulk of global HIV/AIDS funding for distribution among U.S. federal agencies. As with the PEPFAR coordinator, the new office would operate as a "seventh floor entity," to elevate the importance of strategic communications (ibid). The Coordinator would provide leadership in drawing connections and setting priorities for how broadcasting and public diplomacy should advance core U.S. national security interests and foreign policy goals, marshaling resources and political support to make that happen.

Option 3.1.3 Integrate disparate functions under one USAID-like sub-agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy that is under the DoS but with a seat on the NSC principals committee.

The sub-agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy would operate as a distinct agency with its own congressional appropriation, but under the oversight of the DoS. The new agency would integrate broadcasting, media engagement, and public diplomacy activities under one organizational banner, pursuing synergies and efficiencies across the portfolio. As is the case currently with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the new sub-agency Administrator would become a permanent member of the U.S. National Security Council to ensure strategic communications has a consistent voice in key foreign policy decision-making. Ideally, this would be at the level of the Principals Committee, with the fallback option of the Deputies Committee.

In practice, this would require rebalancing mandates and redistributing resources, such that the new agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy would subsume the following programs: the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance; the U.S. Agency for Global Media and its stable of broadcasters; the DoS Global Engagement Center and Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs; and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, among others.

Option 3.1.4 Establish an independent MCC-like agency as a center of excellence to do strategic communications differently, focused on tangible results, local partnerships, and clear priorities.

The new agency, designed similarly to the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), would operate as a center of excellence to practice demand-responsive and results-focused strategic communications. It would set out clear prioritization measures to identify a subset of priority countries for investment rather than trying to work everywhere; embrace co-creation with local partners in target countries to work on time-limited projects of mutual interest rather than those designed solely in Washington; and adhere to rigorous and transparent metrics to screen, monitor, and evaluate projects.

The new agency would invest in projects that: (i) help countries build resilience to malign information influence through strengthening the capacity of domestic media; (ii) support reforms to facilitate greater transparency of media ownership and mandatory disclosure of sponsored content; (iii) build media literacy within the general population, as well as the identification of and response to disinformation. Congress and the executive branch could maintain current levels of investment in the existing strategic communications infrastructure, but channel new growth into a new agency that is fit-for-purpose.

Option 3.1.5 Form a “DFC-like” agency to crowd-in private sector involvement in reaching new media markets, supporting information infrastructure, and brokering strategic partnerships.

The new federal government agency would reduce barriers and crowd-in U.S. businesses into the media and telecommunications markets of other countries in several ways: financing (both debt instruments and equity investments), insurance (political and economic risk), brokering (helping find and match U.S. companies with willing partners in the local market for joint ventures), and advisory support. It would be designed to be complementary, not duplicative, to the U.S. Development Finance Corporation (DFC). The new agency would have a more focused mandate to exclusively focus on telecommunications and media markets, particularly in areas that are deemed to be the most at risk for co-optation and malign foreign influence in the information space.

3.2 Operational Changes to Increase Coherence, Alignment, and/or Results

Option 3.2.1 Institute an interagency coordination committee in the NSC for strategic communications to develop joint strategies, share best practices, and fund joint activities.

As part of the appropriations process, the President would be required to work with all relevant agencies to develop a coherent U.S. strategic communications roadmap that articulates how broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts should be resourced, targeted, organized, coordinated, and measured to advance the National Security

Strategy. Congress could also mandate a time period within which the strategy must be produced and the frequency of reporting on progress to Congress tied to future appropriations.

Option 3.2.2 Require the President to produce a strategic communications roadmap to achieve the U.S. NSS and annually report on progress through the appropriations process.

A new interagency coordination committee for strategic communications within the National Security Council would be formed with representatives from the DoS, Defense, USAID, and the Intelligence Community. To be effective, the committee would need to have a mandate and resources from the President to promote interagency coordination both at a strategic level (through articulating joint strategies and plans) and at an operational level (through creating the conditions to effectively share information on relevant activities and assets), as well as fund innovative new projects that would provide small-scale strategic communications wins and help foster a culture of collaboration. The innovation fund should be designed to increase the benefits and reduce the perceived transaction costs for cooperation across traditional silos by tying resources to the desired behaviors, shrinking the change to discrete projects, and providing a process for identifying the best applicants and ensuring accountability for results.

Option 3.2.3 Appropriate funds for broadcasting and public diplomacy to achieve broad outcomes rather than dictating specific inputs, but earmark 3 percent to support data-driven decisions and reporting of progress.

Congress should tie future appropriations for broadcasting and public diplomacy to broader outcomes that advance U.S. national interests (such as those outlined in a coherent strategic communications roadmap from option 3.2.1) rather than dictating how they should be achieved (e.g., radio versus digital). However, there should be an explicit requirement that 3 percent of these funds go to research, monitoring, and evaluation to better align programming with target audiences, make course corrections as needed, and report on progress to the White House, Congress, and the public.

Option 3.2.4 Require the DoS and the USAGM to report on progress in implementing reforms to modernize broadcasting and public diplomacy for the 21st century via the appropriations process.

As part of future appropriations, include explicit requirements for the DoS and the USAGM to report on how they have already and will in future: (i) decentralize more capacity, resources, and mandate for the design and delivery of strategic communications from headquarters to the missions/grantees; (ii) align targeting of resources to demonstrated local demand and U.S. goals; and (iii) update roles and career tracks for field and headquarters staff working on broadcasting and public diplomacy to better recruit, train, reward, and retain top talent.

Option 3.2.5 Fund the formation of a non-partisan, non-governmental organization to promote mutual understanding, people-to-people ties, and shared democratic norms between Americans and counterparts.

The new organization could possibly be created under the auspices of the National Endowment for Democracy and would build bridges between American businesspeople, media professionals, students, faculty, and civil society advocates with their peers in other countries to build relations and common purpose around shared democratic values and norms. Programming could include: short and medium-term exchange programs, mentoring programs, foreign language learning, clubs for youth, communities of practice for professionals, training, and events.

Option 3.2.6 Establish a Partnership for Global Education and Cultural Understanding with G7 allies as a people-focused sister initiative to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).

The U.S. should collaborate with like-minded G7 allies to mobilize resources to facilitate education and cultural exchange, media cooperation, and broadcasting to support the development of free, open, and inclusive societies. Programming could involve jointly funded educational and cultural exchange programs; vocational and professional training, with an emphasis on those working in the media, education, and justice sectors; and joint international broadcasting and media cooperation activities.

Option 3.2.7. Revisit and revise legislation that hampers mobilizing the participation of the American public in being part of the solution to safeguard U.S. reputational security.

The U.S. should review relevant language in the Smith-Mundt Act and its later amendments, the 1994 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, along with other legislation to determine how to allow for adequate protections of the American public, while increasing the freedom of the DoS and the USAGM to be effective communicators to and partners with non-government actors that can support their work. Congress could consider including provisions that require disclosure of the source of funding for materials that are shared with domestic audiences, ensuring that the materials available are truthful, contain no instances of deception, and are non-partisan in not promoting the parochial interests of any party.

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Background Research Gates Forum I

Assessing U.S. Historical Strategic Communications: Priorities, Practices, and Lessons from the Cold War through the Present Day

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1. Introduction

Administrations come and go, but America’s pursuit of influence with foreign leaders and publics as central to our national security is surprisingly durable. As a case in point: the last five national security strategies, issued by Republican and Democratic leaders, underscored that the United States must sustain and renew its capacity to project influence on a global stage (White House, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2022).¹ Starting with this end in mind, influence is fundamentally about changing the attitudes or behaviors of target audiences in ways that advance U.S. national interests. Strategic communications² (SC) is critical to this endeavor, as it amplifies preferred messages, cultivates shared norms, and forges common bonds with foreign counterparts to “want what [America] wants” (Nye, 2011). As Cull (2022) argues in a companion paper to this one: reputation is not an “optional extra in diplomatic life, but a vital part of statecraft.” As we argue here, it is also instrumental to America’s ability to exert influence.

Unfortunately, America’s strategic communications toolkit—in this paper we focus on international broadcasting and public diplomacy—has atrophied following years of comparative neglect. Rhetoric is powerful, but resourcing is a more revealing indication of one’s true priorities. By this metric, civilian influence efforts are an under-funded mandate. In 2020, the U.S. government devoted just 0.03% of total federal expenditures to public diplomacy and global media activities. Leadership is another barometer of relative priority, and here too, U.S. actions do not match its rhetoric. The most senior position in U.S. public diplomacy, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, has been vacant for an estimated 40 percent of the time since its inception (ACPD, 2022).

¹ President George W. Bush (White House, 2006) acknowledged that while “we do not seek to dictate to other states the choices they make, we do seek to influence the calculations on which these choices are based.” President Barack Obama (White House, 2010 and 2015) saw that rebuilding the sources of American influence was essential to shaping an “international order capable of overcoming the challenges of the 21st century” and the “trajectories of historic [global] transitions underway.” President Donald Trump (White House, 2017) argued that bolstering America’s influence was paramount for the U.S. to compete with near peer rivals within international institutions and provide an example that “penetrates the gloomy regions of despotism.” Most recently, President Joseph Biden (White House, 2022) emphasized investing in the tools of American influence bilaterally, as well as working with allies to expand our collective influence to solve shared challenges and shape the global strategic environment.

² We define strategic communications as: the systematic design and implementation of communication initiatives by a political entity (a state actor or non-state actor working on a state’s behalf) to achieve predefined goals that advance broader national interests. This definition has been adapted from noted scholar R.S. Zaharna (2010), from her book on U.S. strategic communications and public diplomacy after 9/11.

Although responsibilities for broadcasting and public diplomacy cut across multiple agencies, there is little formal coordination to ensure that these disparate efforts add up to more than the sum of their parts. The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's consistent recommendation—that the White House establish a “policy coordination committee” for information statecraft within the National Security Council with representatives from the Departments of State (DoS) and Defense (DoD), as well as the Intelligence Community (IC)—has fallen on deaf ears year after year (ACPD, 2019, 2020, 2021b).

Until recently, U.S. government personnel (e.g., foreign service officers, local employees) tasked with implementing core strategic communications responsibilities were operating within a “50-year old legacy structure” from the 1970s, using tools designed for the analog age rather than an increasingly digital world (ACPD, 2021a). Practitioners and politicians alike, albeit for different reasons, lament that America's legislative frameworks hamper, rather than facilitate, U.S. efforts to tell its story well to foreign publics, mobilize domestic support for making these investments, and crowd-in complementary expertise from non-governmental and private sector actors.

As a result of this status quo, U.S. leaders are constrained in their ability to counter negative narratives spread by competitors who seek to challenge America's global leadership—from conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns to more traditional public relations stories. Nor are we well prepared to promote more positive stories of America's role in the world. Why is this and how can we fix it? The starting point of any reform effort begins with a sound diagnosis of where we are and how we got here.

In this background paper, we take a retrospective look at U.S. strategic communications across three critical junctures in U.S. history: the Cold War (1946-1990), the post-Cold War and 9/11 period (1991-2007), and the contemporary era (2008-2022). At each juncture, we systematically examine how America's international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been resourced, organized, coordinated, and targeted. Our intent with this paper is one part baselining (i.e., what has been the state-of-play), one part problem identification (i.e., what is working, what is not, and why), and one part groundwork laying for subsequent papers to assess options that will best resolve chronic pain points and strengthen U.S. strategic communications in an era of intensified great power competition.

Specifically, we answer several overarching questions:

- How have U.S. strategic communications goals and capabilities evolved over time? To what extent have these efforts been successful or not—and why?
- Where has strategic communications fit within the broader U.S. foreign policy apparatus—from national security strategy to day-to-day operations? How has this positioning enabled or constrained the U.S. in effectively resourcing, evaluating, and coordinating its efforts?
- What lessons learned can be derived from past attempts, both successes and failures, to reform U.S. strategic communications to date?

In answering these questions, the AidData research team at William & Mary's Global Research Institute employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we analyzed U.S. congressional activity and executive policy across the three periods of interest to pinpoint the extent to which SC was a stated priority of the U.S. government at the time: what commitments were made, how were these promises to be fulfilled and operationalized in practice, and with what authorities and resources?³ Second, we analyzed historical funding for America's broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts across the three time periods to assess revealed priorities in how U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been resourced and targeted.⁴ Third, we conducted extensive desk research to examine operating documents and evaluations produced by USG agencies and third parties to understand how SC was organized, coordinated, and whether it was effective.

³ To inform the legislative analysis, we collected data on 2,136 results from Congress.gov using a series of targeted searches that yielded an initial dataset of 757 unique pieces of legislation. After reviewing the initial dataset and assessing the relevancy of individual pieces of legislation, we conducted a second round of targeted searches on Congress.gov to gather additional data and conducted a second relevance assessment. This two-stage process yielded a final dataset of 130 pieces of relevant legislation, from which we gathered 557 data points with information pertinent to the historical impact of Congress on U.S. strategic communications and public diplomacy.

⁴ The data on State Department Public Diplomacy Activities were collected from the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's Comprehensive Annual Reports on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting. Where available, the topline funding to public diplomacy was used, along with specific agencies and programs identified. Funding to thematic cross-agency themes, such as Education and Cultural Exchange, and Broadcasting, was also recorded. Our team identified a total expenditure of \$88 billion dollars (constant USD 2021) to broadcasting and public diplomacy activities between 1949 and 2020. Reliable topline data is available from 1980-2020. For years prior to 1980, our team estimated figures based on individual programs and their reported budgets, though these likely represent only partial figures.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Sections 2-4 provide a deep dive overview of how U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy was organized, resourced, coordinated, and targeted in three time periods: Cold War (Section 2), post Cold War and 9/11 (Section 3), and the contemporary period (Section 4). In Section 5, we provide a concluding assessment of successes, failures, and lessons to feed forward into Gates Forum deliberations about how we might reimagine America’s strategic communications capabilities to be fit-for-purpose in an era of intensified strategic competition within a multiplex world.⁵ Table 1 elaborates the evaluation criteria and supporting questions we used to assess each time period.

Table 1. Evaluation Criteria and Supporting Questions

Evaluation Criteria	Supporting Questions for Consideration
Strategic Directions	What were the stated objectives of U.S. efforts at key junctures in U.S. history, as compared to the present day? Who were the primary target audiences of interest? What strategies and approaches were employed to operationalize these in practice?
Operational Practices	How has U.S. strategic communications been organized, resourced, and coordinated across the interagency at key junctures in U.S. history compared to the present day?
Revealed Priorities	How has the volume and distribution of financing for U.S. strategic communications (particularly public diplomacy) varied over time, by agency, and focus?
Authorizing Mandates	To what extent did U.S. strategic communications enjoy Congressional, executive, and popular support at key junctures in U.S. history compared to the present day?
Results and Lessons	In what ways did U.S. strategic communications appear to succeed or fall-short of its stated objectives at key junctures in U.S. history and against what metrics? What lessons learned should we take away from this period that should be applied to future U.S. strategic communications (i.e., success criteria, blind spots to overcome)?

⁵ A multiplex world features a multiplicity of actors vying for influence and growing complexity in the form of trans-boundary issues that are multidimensional, unpredictable, and require collective action.

2. Cold War Era: Strategic Communications to Contain Communism (1946-1990)

Many scholars and policymakers point to the Cold War era as a “golden age” of U.S. strategic communications (Center, 2013). America certainly had several advantages in its favor at this key juncture in history: a clear opponent (the Soviet Union), a compelling objective (to protect democratic life from encroaching Communism), prioritized target audiences (citizens of the USSR and its allies), and a consistent message to put forward to the world. Moreover, the U.S. consolidated oversight of much of its strategic communications apparatus under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which from 1953 until 1999 managed most of America’s international broadcasting and exchange programs.⁶

In parallel, U.S. strategic communications enjoyed high-level political support, as President Dwight Eisenhower “invited the USIA’s director to sit in both his cabinet and National Security Council” and President Ronald Reagan “appointed his closest friend, Charles Wick,” to direct the agency (Cull, 2022). Two hallmark pieces of legislation—the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961—provided the authorizing mandate for broadcasting and public diplomacy programs. Congress also established the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) in 1948, which has played a crucial role in evaluating civilian strategic communications efforts and promoting greater public understanding of, and support for, these activities. Nevertheless, as we discuss in this section, U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts still faced several challenges during this period.

2.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

The contest for primacy between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ following the end of World War II heavily influenced America’s broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts until the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR). Strategic communications grew in importance as a

⁶ As Cull (2022) in the companion paper to this one explains, “the USIA was created out of a patchwork of pre-existing federal communications activities [including] WWII programs such as Voice of America and the Office of War Information’s embassy posts known as the U.S. Information Service. [It also] absorbed information elements of the allied occupation of Germany and Japan such as the Amerika Hauser in Germany and its information work.”

means of ideological competition when conventional and nuclear forces were at a stalemate (Cull, 2022). Engaging citizens of communist countries who lacked access to information and free speech behind the Iron Curtain was a consistent priority of Congress and the executive branch, as evidenced by a spate of new pieces of legislation and special initiatives. This “arsenal of nonmilitary assets” would prove to be of “critical importance in the long contest with the Soviet Union” (Gates, 2021, p.5).

During the administration of President Harry Truman, Congress passed the Smith-Mundt Act in January 1948 to “promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations” (US Information and Educational Exchange Act, 1948). In 1953, President Eisenhower established the USIA, with the intention to move foreign information initiatives out from under the purview of the State department, including the broadcast of Voice of America (VOA, 2017). In 1961, the Fulbright-Hays Act (i.e., the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act) expanded upon several prior pieces of legislation for a more comprehensive authorizing framework for all U.S. government educational and cultural exchange programs.⁷

On an annual basis, the USIA received Congressional appropriations to fund specific budget line items, which regularly included: broadcasting operations, acquisition of facilities, exchange programs, and international events. Exchange programs administered by the USIA that received regular funding included: the Fulbright and International Visitors Programs, the Humphrey Fellowship Program, and the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship, among other programs. However, implementation was hamstrung by congressional insistence that the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs be responsible for cultural and exchange work, even as they did so primarily by “subcontracting USIA officers in the field to deliver these programs,” at least until reforms during President Jimmy Carter (Cull, 2022).

Broadcasting entities also received regular funding through the appropriations process, including: Voice of America (VOA) and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which oversees Radio and Televisión Martí (established in 1983 and 1990).⁸ Initially, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was considered a private organization and funded by the

⁷ This includes the Fulbright Act of 1946, the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, the Finnish Educational Exchange Act of 1949, and the 1952 Mutual Security Act. By 1971, there was some form of academic exchange in place with 100 countries.
<https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/history/early-years>

⁸ Radio Marti was established in 1983, followed by the addition of Television Marti in 1990.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) until 1971,⁹ when it too began directly receiving congressional appropriations and was later placed under the oversight of the bipartisan Board for International Broadcasting in 1973 (Pomar, 2021 and 2022).

VOA served as a global flagship broadcaster: the “national voice” to explain American policies and tell American stories (ibid). RFE/RL had a larger goal “not simply to inform their listeners but also to bring about the peaceful demise of the Communist system and the liberation of what were known as satellite nations” (Puddington, 2000, ix). The radios pursued these goals by serving as surrogate home radio services and alternatives to the “controlled, party-dominated, domestic press” (ibid). RFE targeted satellite Soviet states, while RL targeted an audience inside the Soviet Union (Congressional Research Service, 2016). Former Director of RFE Ross Johnson described the RFE/RL mandate as providing “listeners with an intellectual bridge to Western Europe and the United States and a factual basis for comprehending their own lives and the world around them, so as to preserve the independent thinking that the controlled domestic media sought to prevent or suppress” (Pomar, 2021).

As the USSR began to loosen its grip on client states in Eastern Europe, Congress sought to exploit a window of opportunity via legislation to increase exchange programs and diplomacy with citizens of the Communist Bloc. This included outreach to Warsaw Pact members such as Hungary and Poland to establish Fulbright Commissions, sister institution relationships, and reciprocal cultural centers. With former USSR countries, the U.S. opened up interparliamentary, educational, legal, and business exchange programs with citizens of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and ultimately Russia itself. Congress also passed acts that established additional diplomatic facilities in newly independent states of the former USSR.¹⁰

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, Congress began to broaden the aperture of U.S. strategic communications by mandating an uptick in public diplomacy efforts towards regions and countries undergoing political unrest. The rationale for this programming was three-fold: to support citizens in those countries, cultivate goodwill for the United States, and encourage a peaceful resolution of conflicts. In this vein, Congress appropriated funding for scholarships targeted to undergraduate university

⁹ The radio stations were covert operations of the CIA and governed by American corporate boards for the first 20 years of their existence, with the intent of providing a “firewall” between the U.S. government and the broadcasters to increase perceived credibility (Pomar, 2021).

¹⁰ Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989, 1989; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, 1991; FREEDOM Support Act, 1992.

students from conflict-prone countries in Central America that were strategically important to the United States.¹¹ It also passed specific appropriations funding USIA grants to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to support the transition of apartheid South Africa to a non-racial democracy and to encourage non-violence among dissident factions.¹²

In terms of operations and governance, the USIA was its own agency but reported directly to the National Security Council (National Security Council, 1955). This provided opportunities for coordination and cooperation between the various intelligence agencies, the State department, and the White House. Throughout the Cold War period, the USIA also benefited from its directors' personal relationships with the President, which increased the agency's visibility with an important political champion. In fact, one might argue that the salience of the Cold War threat motivated the U.S. foreign policy and national security apparatuses to work more closely together than we have seen in other time periods, often with direct input from the President, to ensure coherent and effective strategic communications efforts.

President Dwight Eisenhower gave his USIA Director a seat at the table in both his cabinet and the NSC, as did President John F. Kennedy with Edward Murrow (Director of the USIA in the early 1960s).¹³ This political backing may have aided Murrow's efforts to modernize the USIA, with an increased focus on developing countries in Latin America and Africa, and to hire a more diverse workforce for the agency (Belovari, 2008). Leonard Marks was the lawyer for the Johnson family communications business before becoming USIA Director under President Lyndon Johnson (Cull, 2022). President Ronald Reagan hired his close friend, Charles Z. Wick, who served as USIA Director for most of the 1980s (ADST, 2022).

Of course, this hand-in-glove relationship was not the case for all directors of the agency. Frank Shakespeare, USIA Director under President Richard Nixon, threatened to tender his resignation before being allowed to attend NSC meetings (Fisher, 2011). Meanwhile, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought to exclude

¹¹ Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1985, 1985.

¹² Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1986 and 1987, 1985; Dire Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Assistance, Food Stamps, Unemployment Compensation Administration, and Other Urgent Needs, and Transfers, and Reducing Funds Budgeted for Military Spending Act of 1990, 1990; South African Democratic Transition Support Act of 1993, 1993.

¹³ As Cull (2022) notes, this close working relationship may have been aided by the fact that some of Murrow's deputies were personally connected to "Kennedy's inner circle."

Shakespeare from decision-making processes (Cull, 2022). There were also cases of a breakdown in communications between the White House and the USIA, most noticeably between the Johnson administration and then-USIA Director Carl Rowan, as the President saw global polling on perceptions of the U.S. as a threat to U.S. elections in 1964 (ibid).

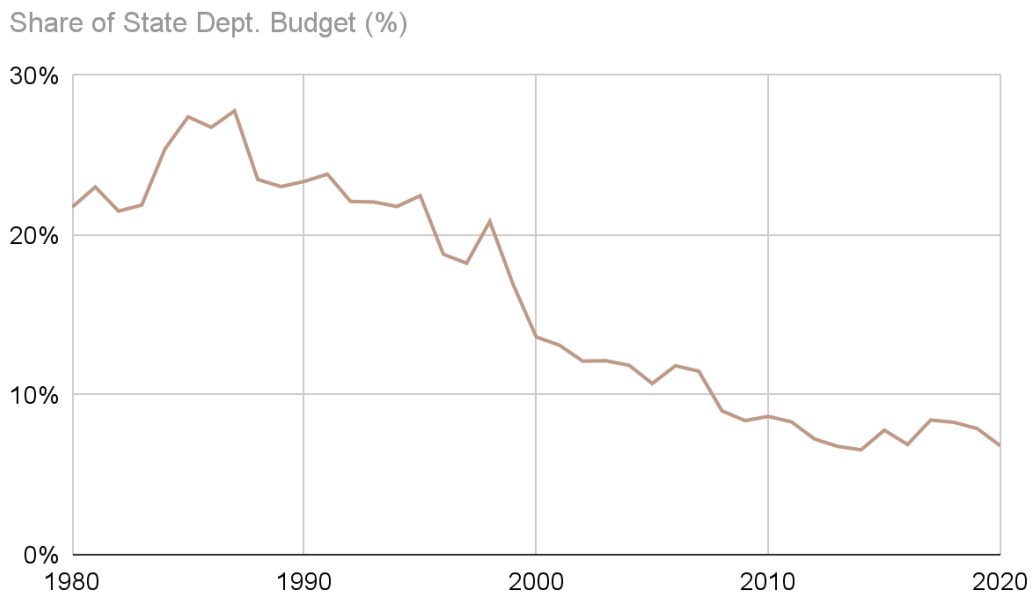
2.2 Revealed Priorities

The late 1980s appear to have been the high-water mark for resourcing civilian strategic communications over the past four decades—not necessarily in total dollars spent, but rather as a share of funding for the State Department budget programming (Figure 1) and in overall federal spending (Figure 2).¹⁴ In 1987, for example, the Department of State and the USIA expended US\$2.1 billion (constant USD 2021) to support global media and public diplomacy activities. This resource envelope represented 28 percent of the total US\$7.4 billion (constant USD 2021) available to these agencies and approximately 0.10% of total federal spending.

Although the total dollar amounts have increased in subsequent decades, there has been a declining share of funding available for civilian strategic communications within the DoS budget and as a proportion of total federal spending. As a case in point: these activities attracted only 7 percent of the DoS budget in 2020 and represented only 0.03% of total federal expenditures.

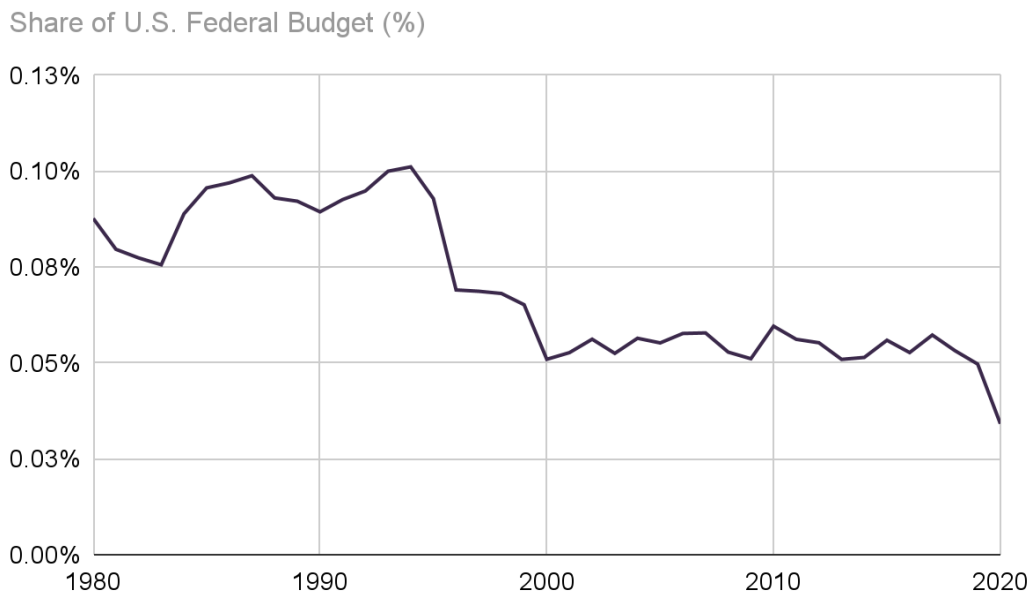
¹⁴ Data availability was relatively sparse to provide a complete picture of aggregate resourcing for civilian strategic communications prior to 1980.

Figure 1. U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Share of the State Department Budget, 1980-2020



Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a share (percentage) of overall financing available to these agencies. The underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021. Overall financing for the Department of State was obtained from the Office of Management and Budget's Historical Table 4.1—Outlays by Agency (1962-2027). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables/>

Figure 2. U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Share of Total Federal Government Expenditures, 1980-2020



Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a share (percentage) of overall federal government budget expenditures. Underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021. Overall federal expenditures were obtained from the Office of Management and Budget's Historical Table 4.1—Outlays by Agency (1962-2027). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables/>

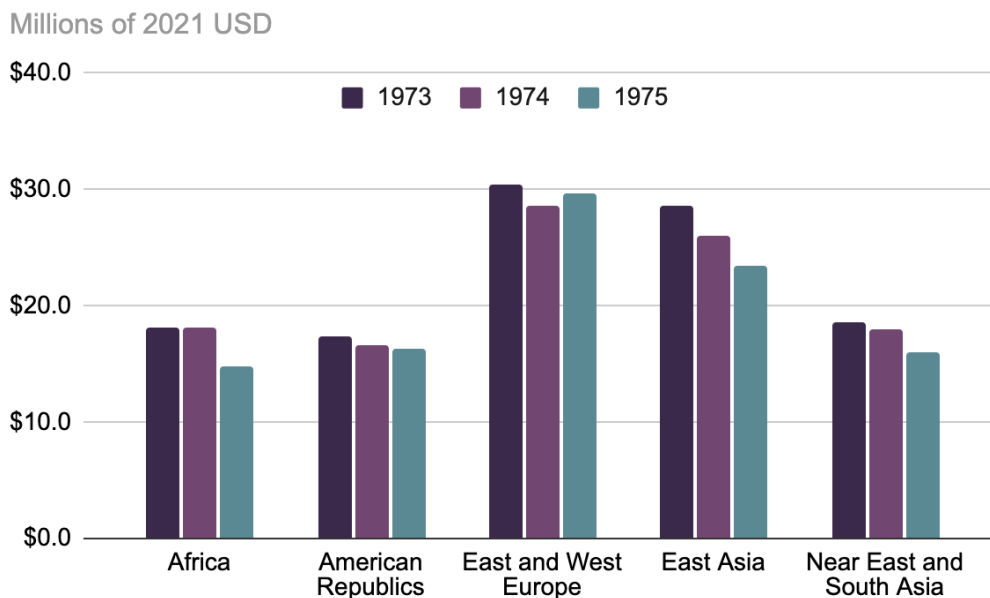
These overall numbers provide a useful picture of the relative importance of civilian-led strategic communications within the U.S. government budget; however, this does not tell us about whether and how these resources were ultimately targeted to advance U.S. interests. Fortunately, even with relatively sparse historical data, some disaggregation is possible to get a better pulse on America's primary target audiences and preferred tools to reach these publics during this period.

Geographically, East and West Europe attracted the lion's share of resources, followed by East Asia, consistent with the strategic imperative to counter the rise of communism and hasten the USSR's decline. Notwithstanding the spate of legislation and appropriations made by Congress to expand broadcasting efforts into Cuba,¹⁵ strategic communications expenditures tended to deprioritize U.S. neighbors in the Western

¹⁵ Primarily oriented towards the Office of Cuba Broadcasting's Radio Marti and later TV Marti.

Hemisphere (i.e., the “American Republics” in the original budgets). Similarly, the Near East and South Asia were relative afterthoughts when it came to SC funding. Figure 3 provides an illustrative breakdown of resourcing for public diplomacy by region for the period of 1973-75.

Figure 3. Regional Breakdown of Public Diplomacy Financing (Excluding Broadcasting), 1973-1975



Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian public diplomacy efforts (educational and cultural affairs spending, exclusive of broadcasting) overseen by the Department of State, broken down by region for each of the years 1973, 1974, and 1975. A comparable regional breakdown for international broadcasting is unavailable for this time period. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Region names reflect State department regional groupings at the time, as reflected in line items. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from State Department reports.

Exchange programs were an early U.S. resourcing priority in the immediate post-WWII period. In the 1950s, there was substantial emphasis on bolstering people-to-people ties between U.S. citizens and counterparts in other countries. Such programs were aimed at not only promoting broader post-war peace and reconciliation efforts, but also projecting U.S. norms and narratives with key publics to thwart the USSR’s sphere of influence. In 1950 alone, the U.S. government committed \$180.8 million (constant USD 2021) to such education and cultural exchange efforts.

Although there is little data available on United States mass media broadcasting budgets prior to 1980, once we pick up the resourcing trail in 1980 onwards, these activities far outstripped the funding devoted to smaller-scale exchange programs. In 1983, for example, the USG deployed nearly two times the amount of funding to global media activities as it did to education and cultural exchange: US\$358 million versus US\$180 million (constant USD 2021). This revealed preference for investing in broadcasting over people-to-people ties remained consistent throughout the period.

Activities carried out by the Department of Defense also played a crucial role in amplifying U.S. messages abroad and strengthening military-to-military ties, particularly via exchange programs. Notably, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reported that military exchange programs accounted for 61 percent of the total US\$2.8 billion (constant USD 2021) the U.S. government spent on “scientific, military, educational, and cultural exchange programs” (ACPD, 1982, p.23). Not only do these programs provide valuable points of contact between the U.S. and our allies, but they have the opportunity to share American norms and values with leaders in our partners’ militaries. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of publicly available budget data to accurately gauge the size of these DoD-led exchange programs, such that we focus here primarily on civilian-led efforts.

Private sector funding played a small but important role in this era, as executive branch agencies courted the business and philanthropic communities to fund both broadcasting and exchange activities. The USIA crowded in US\$18.3 million (constant USD 2021) in private funds for “exhibits” via the International Bureau of Expositions, and US\$1.4 million (constant USD 2021) to support television broadcasting of the program “Let Poland Be Poland” in 1982 (ACPD, 1982, p.29). In 1983, President Reagan sought US\$10 million dollars in matching funds from private businesses to support his signature International Youth Exchange Program for youth aged 15-25 in the U.S. and counterpart countries (ACPD, 1983, p.29).

3. Post-Cold War & 9/11 Era: U.S. Strategic Communications to Counter Terrorism (1991-2007)

U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts during the post-Cold War and 9/11 era reflect the need to navigate multiple transitions: a bipolar to a unipolar world, analog to digital communications, centralized to fragmented information, Europe to Asia and the Middle East, and a singular purpose to multiple competing priorities.

The early years of the period were marked by the vacuum created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Washington responded with a major restructuring of the strategic communications apparatus, including the privatization and consolidation of legacy broadcasters, as Congress and the executive branch sought to defund redundant programs designed to counter threats they felt no longer existed. In parallel, there was a search for alternative use cases for broadcasting and public diplomacy, as the prior emphasis on reaching citizens in Communist bloc countries was no longer the focus. The result was a diffusion of priorities—from enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Iraqi sanctions to tackling global climate change—reducing clarity of purpose and coherence in messaging (PDD 68, 1998; Taylor, 2006).

The later part of the period was indelibly shaped by the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 and their aftermath. This proved to be a consequential pivot point for America's strategic communications, as the crisis triggered a harsh "realization that foreign perceptions had domestic consequences" (Zaharna, 2010). For a brief window, "public diplomacy [became] a national security issue," as U.S. leaders viewed civilian efforts to win hearts and minds as central to winning the war on terrorism (ibid). The episode also triggered substantial introspection in Washington as it reflected on two dissonant realities. U.S. strategic communications were of critical importance to rebuilding relations with the Arab and Muslim world, as well as deterring future threats. Yet, America's broadcasting and public diplomacy did not sufficiently deter the events of 9/11. This prompted "more than a dozen" special commissions, task forces, studies,

and reports that all sought to analyze the deficiencies and propose recommendations to “fix...repair...invigorate” America’s strategic communications toolkit (ibid).¹⁶

3.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

The relative success of U.S. strategic communications during the Cold War period was bittersweet, as it provided an opportunity to claim a political victory, but opened the door to discussions of reaping a “peace dividend” by cutting programs seen as having outlived their usefulness (Pomar, 2021). As a case in point, then-candidate Bill Clinton made the idea of a peace dividend central to his campaign for the presidency in 1993 and “zeroed out funding for RFE/RL” in his first budget sent to Congress (ibid). This enthusiasm for cost-cutting was not limited to the executive branch alone, and Senator Russ Feingold became a major advocate for the closure of the radio stations (ibid).

In this respect, the 1994 International Broadcasting Act—which said that RFE/RL should be privatized before the end of 1999¹⁷ and merged VOA into the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) as a cost-saving measure¹⁸—may be thought of as a strategic “compromise” (Pomar, 2021). Although it consolidated the U.S. SC apparatus and laid the groundwork to reduce resourcing, the legislation did manage to preserve the operations of some of America’s most successful broadcasting tools.

At the start of the period, when the USIA was still the central authority managing U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts, Congress funded the organization, its subsidiaries, and grantees through the same appropriations structure as it had during the Cold War. This changed as President Clinton sought the reorganization of the USIA under the State Department with the goal “to strengthen public diplomacy through its integration into the policy process.” Congress formally abolished the USIA in 1999 and

¹⁶ For example, Zaharna (2010) provides a lengthy discussion of several of the major inquiries during this time, including: the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) 2001 report “Improving the U.S. Public Diplomacy Campaign in the War Against Terrorism,” the CFR 2002 Independent Task Force on “Public Diplomacy: A Strategy for Reform,” and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy 2002 Annual Report. In 2003, there was a series of reports, including the Heritage Foundation’s report on “How to Re-invigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy,” the Center for the Study of the Presidency’s report on “Strengthening U.S.-Muslim Communications,” CFR’s report on “Finding America’s Voice: Reinvigorating Public Diplomacy,” and numerous Government Accountability Office assessments. In 2004, this included the Djerejian Commission report “Changing Minds, Winning Peace” and the 2004 Strategic Communications report from the Defense Science Board, a Pentagon advisory panel.

¹⁷ Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

¹⁸ Ibid.

reassigned its international broadcasting duties to the BBG and its public information and exchange programs to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.¹⁹

Following the dissolution of the USIA, Congress shifted away from earmarking resources for specific initiatives or entities²⁰ to authorizing broader appropriations to fund “international broadcasting operations” or “public diplomacy international information programs” writ large.²¹ There were two exceptions to this general rule—the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB) and the BBG—which both continued to receive program-specific appropriations within budget legislation.

Why did this shift occur? It could be that as Congressional leaders viewed strategic communications as less of a political priority, in the absence of the singular threat of the USSR and spread of Communism, they became more detached from earmarking funds to specific priorities. This rationale might also explain the one outlier to this trend—the OCB—which continued to receive dedicated carve-outs of funding in appropriations processes. The Cuban-American community in Florida is a powerful political constituency in a swing state and traditionally had been vocally supportive of U.S. broadcasting efforts to penetrate Cuba’s restrictive information space (Cull, 2022).²²

Alternatively, this shift could have reflected new thinking within Congress that providing flexibility of funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy programs would empower the implementing agencies to do what needed to be done with minimal restrictions. However, this seems less likely than the political salience argument, given Congress’ continued practice of heavily earmarking funding for specific priorities in other facets of international affairs, such as foreign economic and development assistance.

With the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders’ attention turned from “fostering mutual understanding” with citizens in Communist bloc countries (Taylor, 2006) to a much more diffuse set of priorities, audiences, and topics. From the early to mid-1990s, Congress expanded U.S. broadcasting and exchange efforts in Asia. Initially, this consisted of

¹⁹ Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999, 1998.

²⁰ I.e., Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

²¹ Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994. This included the Fulbright and International Visitors Programs, the Humphrey Fellowship Program, the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship, and private sector programs.

²² However, Cull (2022) acknowledges that the Cuban American lobby was a “mixed blessing” for strategic communications, as the bloc substantially skewed broadcasting content to focus on “anti-Castro” messages, regardless of whether this would play well with or be heard by Cubans on the island.

Congress approving the establishment of exchange programs,²³ funding scholarships for students,²⁴ and establishing broadcast facilities²⁵ in countries across East and Southeast Asia.²⁶ Congress created Radio Free Asia (RFA) in 1994 via the International Broadcasting Act with the mission to provide news and commentary to countries in Asia with limited domestic media ecosystems.²⁷ Through the end of the decade and into the early 2000s, Congress followed the establishment of RFA with a series of specific appropriations for the expansion of broadcasting services within China.²⁸

The Middle East was also an emerging political priority, initially due to the Gulf War and later with respect to the Global War on Terror. Congress passed legislation adapting RFE/RL to engage the public in Iraq and the region. In 1998, it authorized funding to support the Iraqi democratic opposition via broadcasting assistance. It later instructed RFE/RL to establish surrogate radio broadcasting for the Iraqi and Iranian people via two new stations, Radio Free Iraq broadcasting in Arabic and Radio Free Iran broadcasting in Farsi.²⁹

Alongside changing geographic priorities, U.S. leaders had to contend with a dramatically different information environment than the Cold War period. The rise of the 24-hour news cycle increased the speed with which global citizens could access information about events in real-time. In parallel, the growing accessibility of computers, smart phones, and Internet connectivity effectively democratized the production of information by reducing the cost and distance to communicate to local, national, and even global audiences with the stroke of a button. Citizens now had the opportunity to see more clearly how other countries governed themselves and the rights and freedoms their counterparts enjoyed, such that they could demand democratic norms for themselves (Wriston, 1997).

²³ Exchange programs were established between Cambodia, China, Myanmar, and Tibet, with the specific aim of encouraging participation by human rights and democracy leaders.

²⁴ Scholarships to study in the United States were provided for Vietnamese, Cambodian, Burmese, and Tibetan students.

²⁵ The USIA was authorized to initiate the process of establishing offices in Vientiane, Lhasa, and Hong Kong (PRC).

²⁶ Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, 1991; United States-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, 1992; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994; Human Rights, Refugee, and Other Foreign Relations Provisions Act of 1996, 1996.

²⁷ Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

²⁸ These were the Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1999, 1998 and the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2001, and 2000; they authorized the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment (normal trade relations treatment) to the People's Republic of China and established a framework for relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

²⁹ Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, 1998; 1998 Supplemental Appropriations and Rescissions Act, 1998; Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999, 1998.

The 24-hour news cycle created a powerful “CNN effect,” whereby “real-time communications” related to globally important events such as the Tiananmen Square protests, the outbreak of the Gulf War, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. could provoke rapid responses from both citizens and political elites across the world (Robinson, 1999). Rather than relying upon its own broadcasting channels, the U.S. could piggyback on independent media to advance its interests and preferred narratives. For example, during the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush directed his Press Secretary to respond to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein over CNN, knowing that Hussein would be watching, rather than conduct diplomatic negotiations through traditional channels.

Nevertheless, access to technology and more diverse sources of information also created new challenges for U.S. strategic communications to navigate. During the Cold War, U.S. communications channels such as the VOA and RFE/RL were seen as the only trustworthy alternatives to state propaganda readily available for citizens in Communist bloc countries living behind the Iron Curtain. As Gates (2021, p.38) notes, “the United States [was seen] as a standard-bearer for freedom.” In the post-Cold War and 9/11 period, however, global audiences, particularly in the Middle East, did not trust the U.S. (ibid).

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, there was a renewed interest in strategic communications within Washington as a means to combat international terrorism. Al Qaeda made powerful use of propaganda to mobilize recruits and recognized the importance of information as “an asymmetric weapon against powerful nation-states” (Taylor, 2006). Osama bin Laden spoke directly to an international audience via the Al Jazeera network (Hoffman, 2002). U.S. leaders also made use of the megaphone offered by mass media to reach a larger audience more quickly. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, appeared on MTV in February 2002 to “answer questions from young people around the world about what America represents” and make a direct appeal to an “estimated 375 million households in 63 countries worldwide” (CRS, 2006).

America’s broadcasting and public diplomacy after 9/11 had two overarching goals to advance America’s foreign policy interests: “promote U.S. values” and “marginalize...terrorist messages” (Zaharna, 2010). In 2002, Congress authorized the BBG to establish Radio Free Afghanistan as a subsidiary of RFE/RL to operate along

similar lines as Radio Free Iraq and Iran. The new news service provided broadcasts in both the Dari and Pashto languages.³⁰ Congress also passed the 2002 Freedom Promotion Act, which represented a substantial increase in funding for public diplomacy budgets, particularly those focused on the Arab and Muslim world (Zaharna, 2010).³¹ It followed this later that year with appropriations funding for broadcasting operations and facilities with the express purpose of combating international terrorism.³²

In 2003, Congress started making regular appropriations to fund the BBG's newly established Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), which was established as a televised news service broadcast in Arabic.³³ In 2004, Congress passed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act which reaffirmed the importance of public diplomacy as a critical foreign policy tool. The Secretary of State and the BBG were instructed to develop a strategy with long-term objectives to counter anti-U.S. propaganda.³⁴

With legislative and executive branch interests aligned around the imperative to counter international terrorism, the administration of President George W. Bush spawned a series of innovative public diplomacy initiatives that were unique in the degree to which they sought to incorporate private sector best practices from the world of advertising and marketing. Under the leadership of Charlotte Beers, Bush's first Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and a former advertising executive, the U.S. government launched a full-scale multi-media campaign worth an estimated US\$12 million to help rebrand America into something that one could "sell to the Islamic world" (Zaharna, 2010). Stated strategic communications goals included: "informing the world swiftly and accurately about the policies of the U.S. government;" "representing the values and beliefs of the American people, which inform our policies and practices;" and "promoting American values" (ibid).

Cultural appeals such as Radio Sawa (2002) and the lifestyle magazine *Hi* (2003) targeted Arab youth via pop music and celebrity, respectively (Zaharna, 2010). The U.S.

³⁰ Radio Free Afghanistan Act, 2002.

³¹ Zaharna (2010) estimates that the bill "injected 497 million annually into public diplomacy budgets," an increase by "9 percent overall and more than 50 percent in the Arab and Muslim world."

³² 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act for Further Recovery From and Response To Terrorist Attacks on the United States, 2002; Department of Defense and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Recovery from and Response to Terrorist Attacks on the United States Act, 2002.

³³ Emergency Wartime Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2003, 2003; Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense and the Reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004, 2003; Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, 2005, 2005.

³⁴ Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, 2004.

launched the Arabic language Al-Hurra satellite TV network to compete with Al Jazeera or Al-Arabiya (ibid). In the realm of values promotion, the Shared Values campaign “sought to build bridges” by emphasizing “America’s religious tolerance” and commonalities between Muslim-Americans and counterparts overseas by emphasizing “faith, family, and learning” (ibid). These higher price point efforts³⁵ were also accompanied by more traditional programming, as the State Department ramped up in-person and virtual³⁶ exchange programs for youth and working professionals, expanded the number of American Corners to serve as libraries and gathering places for information and events about the U.S., and invested in cultural ambassadors (ibid).

In a bid to marshal a whole-of-government approach, the DoS worked closely with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on joint initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI),³⁷ programming related to independent media development, and an online communications portal “Telling Our Stories” to crowdsource impact stories from beneficiaries of aid projects (Zaharna, 2010). With an expanded resource envelope from Congress in 2003, the Peace Corps also launched complementary efforts to place additional U.S. volunteers in the Arab and Muslim world to build personal relationships (ibid). DoD was also a major player in SC, establishing various initiatives: a “global response team of spokespeople” to counter anti-U.S. narratives, an “Office of Strategic Influence to promote favorable views of the U.S. military,” an “embedded journalist program to accompany U.S. troops into Iraq,” and the Iraqi Media Network to facilitate free and independent news (ibid).³⁸

Karen Hughes (a close confidant of President George W. Bush) continued this spate of innovations during her term as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, but relied more heavily on public-private partnerships to mobilize resources and operationalize her ideas. For example, Hughes crowded-in US\$800 million in private sector funding to increase the number of participants in U.S. exchange programs from 30,000 to 50,000, as well as broker partnerships between the Aspen Institute and U.S.

³⁵ Many of the new initiatives were multi-million dollar efforts to launch: Hi magazine (US\$ 4 million), Radio Sawa (US\$ 35 million), Al-Hurra (US\$62 million for one year of operation) (Zaharna, 2010).

³⁶ For example, the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs offered a series of virtual programs with assistance from non-governmental organizations working in the realm of Internet-based education (Zaharna, 2010).

³⁷ MEPI was a multi-faceted effort to “bridge the job, freedom, and knowledge gap” by working with Arab partners on programs in education, political and economic reform, and women’s empowerment (Zaharna, 2010).

³⁸ In fact, Cull (2022) describes Beers as being “frustrated with the [civilian] channels available [for strategic communications] and looking to the U.S. military to take on more of the burden of engaging foreign publics in MENA.”

communications schools to facilitate training for foreign journalists to study in America (Zaharna, 2010). Hughes also heavily emphasized media capacity—forming new regional media hubs and a counter-terrorism communication center, as well as instituting a Rapid Response Unit to monitor and respond to incoming questions from journalists or the public (ibid).

After Hughes' departure, James Glassman substantially changed the emphasis of U.S. strategic communications, pivoting away from broadcasting in favor of more targeted social networking, such as leveraging alumni of U.S. exchange programs and new digital technologies such as YouTube and social media as part of a new "U.S. Public Diplomacy 2.0" (Zaharna, 2010). An even larger shift was one of tone, rather than channel, of U.S. strategic communications. Glassman made the case that the U.S. should be less worried about promoting its own brand and more focused on destroying its competitors' brands (ibid).

When it comes to the coordination and organization of U.S. strategic communications, the post-Cold War and 9/11 period was a tale of two countervailing trends. On the one hand, there was increasing consolidation, with the privatization of RFE/RL, the merger of VOA into the BBG, and the dissolution of the USIA. On the other hand, there was a proliferation of new actors, with new broadcasting outlets formed, the mobilization of additional agencies' contributions, and an increasing use of public-private partnerships with companies and non-governmental actors. According to (Nakumara and Weed, 2009), there were "14 cabinet-level departments and over 48 independent agencies and commissions" actively involved in "at least one form of official public diplomacy...most often exchanges and training programs" during this time. There were numerous ad hoc attempts to put in place interagency coordination mechanisms for strategic communications, but these were largely intermittent and ultimately deemed to be ineffective.

In 2002, President George W. Bush instituted two attempts at coordination vehicles for U.S. strategic communications. He established a Strategic Communications Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) within the National Security Council (NSC) and tasked this body to create a national strategy. Bush also created a new White House Office of Global Communication (OGC) that same year with a mandate to "coordinate strategic communications overseas that integrate the President's themes and truthfully depict America and Administration policies" (White House, 2003a). However, the OGC in

practice operated in more of an advisory role than a coordination function, with specified functional responsibilities to: (i) formulate messages that reflect the SC framework and priorities of the U.S; (ii) develop strategies in consultation with the DoS and the National Security Advisor; (iii) work with other agencies to stand up temporary teams of communicators for short-term placement in areas of high global interest and media attention; and (iv) encourage the use of new technologies to convey messages to foreign publics (White House, 2003b).

With minimal formal authority to dictate how agencies targeted their resources, implemented programs, or evaluated results, the OGC was understandably hamstrung in overcoming the fragmentation of U.S. SC efforts across myriad actors. Even the NSC PCC on strategic communications was unsuccessful in achieving its objectives, as it produced a draft strategy that was not released publicly and was then subsequently disbanded with the outbreak of the Iraq War (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising then that a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of public diplomacy efforts conducted in 2003 found that the “the United States lacked a government-wide, interagency public diplomacy strategy, defining the messages and means for communications abroad...[despite] a number of aborted attempts to develop a strategy...which complicates the task of conveying consistent messages, which increases the risk of making damaging communication mistakes” (GAO, 2006).

In April 2006, President Bush established a new Policy Coordination Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication under the direction of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (GAO, 2006). The committee included representatives from the DoS, the DoD, Treasury, the NSC, the IC, and other agencies. Its stated mandate was to coordinate interagency activities to ensure that: (i) all agencies work together to disseminate the President’s themes and messages; (ii) all PD and SC resources, programs, and activities are effectively coordinated to support those messages; and (iii) every agency gives PD and SC the same level of priority that the President does” (ibid).

The committee did issue a National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications in 2007, the “first interagency approved communications plan for the U.S. after 9/11” (Zaharna, 2010). But it was criticized for “failing to clearly define agency roles and responsibilities” and for poor implementation in the absence of “agency-specific plans” (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). The national strategy identified

three objectives for U.S. strategic communications to: (i) offer a positive vision of hope grounded in our basic values; (ii) marginalize violent extremists who threaten our freedom; (iii) and nurture common interests and values between Americans and other countries, cultures, and faiths (ibid). However, the strategy's emphasis on form (i.e., a plan to tick the box) over function (i.e., mechanisms to ensure the plan is operationalized effectively) may reflect the episodic nature of a committee that did not meet regularly as a group and instead relied on individual members to coordinate bilaterally (ibid).

3.2 Revealed Priorities

In total dollars spent, the U.S. initially doubled down on funding for strategic communications following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Budgets for broadcasting and public diplomacy held steady from the peaks of the 1980s and even grew in some years. This reached a high of US\$2.5 billion (constant USD 2021) in 1994 that would not be matched again until 2010 and exceeded any annual budget in real terms after 2018. However, there was a substantial reversal of fortune for strategic communications in the late 1990s, as funding levels began to plummet; this lasted until there was a later resurgence of interest after 9/11 (Figure 4). Examining these funds in isolation obscures the fact that even as funding in absolute terms for strategic communications was increasing during the post-Cold War and 9/11 period, in relative terms it was attracting a declining share of the State Department budget and overall federal spending (as shown previously in Figures 1 and 2). Both measures are useful, but tell us different things about the relative health of U.S. strategic communications.

Funding in absolute terms helps us approximate the total resource envelope available for broadcasting and public diplomacy activities between 1991-2007, as compared to previous and later periods. What is immediately visible from this vantage point is that there was a much higher degree of volatility in funding available for strategic communications during the post Cold War and 9/11 period than any other period we consider in this paper. This dynamic likely reflects the strategic ambiguity of SC early on, as Congress and the White House branch questioned the continued relevance of broadcasting and public diplomacy in the absence of a single existential threat from a rival power. As Washington saw a use case for strategic communications to counter terrorism subsequent to the 9/11 attacks, there was an increased resolve and

follow-through in funding levels for these activities; however, support was still muted relative to what had been seen at the height of the USSR's power. This point is reinforced by the fact that funding for strategic communications as a share of both the State Department budget and overall federal expenditures began a sharp descent as early as the late 1980s that persisted through the post Cold War and 9/11 period and through the present day.

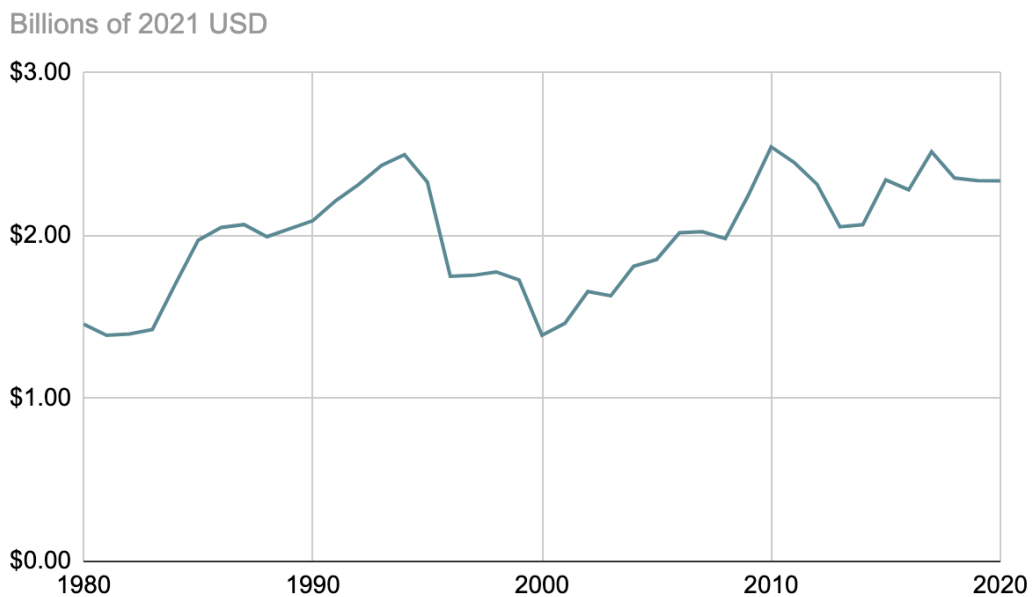
By 1996, budget cuts under President Clinton hit many executive agencies, and strategic communications was one of the first programs on the chopping block. Over US\$578 million (constant USD 2021), a quarter of the strategic communications budget, disappeared in one fell swoop. The share of the DoS budget devoted to strategic communications dropped from 22 to 19 percent of the total envelope. The USIA's allotted budget of US\$1.6 billion (constant USD 2021) in 1996, though roughly comparable to its financing in the 1980s, once again declined as a share of overall strategic communications resources.

Functionally, broadcasting continued to be the preferred vehicle for promoting U.S. messages to foreign publics and leaders. For every dollar the U.S. government committed to education and cultural activities (at least those conducted by civilian agencies), it spent nearly two dollars on international broadcasting in the early 1990s. VOA benefited from expanded resources in the early 1990s. Previously in the 1980s, VOA's budget had dropped by a third between 1986 and 1989, from US\$378 million to US\$254 million (constant USD 2021), but once again expanded in the wake of the Gulf War to US\$392 million in 1993 (constant USD 2021).

By 1996, however, three of the main U.S. broadcasting entities (VOA, RFE, RL) were vulnerable to proposed budget cuts, a reflection of the growing criticism that these Cold War "relics" had outlived their usefulness (Pomar, 2021). Although Congressional action protected broadcasters from the full impact of President Clinton's earlier proposal to "zero out" funding, their resource envelope was still drastically reduced. VOA and RFE/RL had their shares of the overall strategic communications budget cut in half in 1996, receiving US\$164 million and US\$153 million (constant USD 2021), respectively. Overall funding for strategic communications continued its descent until it hit a low of US\$1.4 billion dollars (constant USD 2021) in 2000, accounting for just 14 percent of the Department of State budget.

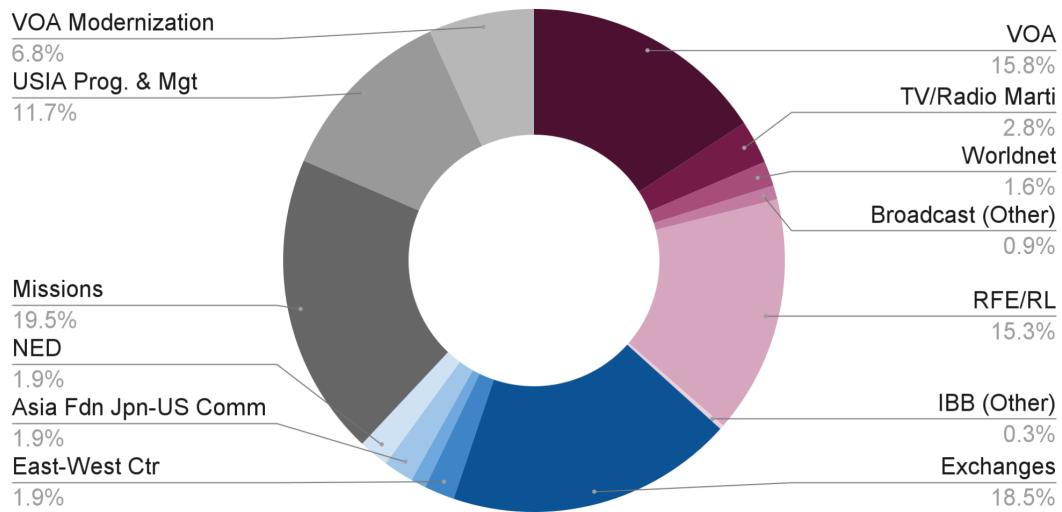
In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, funding for U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy did make up some ground, as it was seen as a central part of the War on Terror; however, this did not appear to have the same galvanizing effect on mobilizing resources as did the imperative to counter the USSR's influence during the Cold War. Later in the 9/11 period, funding did increase to US\$2.0 billion (constant USD 2021) in 2006 and 2007, but this growth did not keep pace with the rest of the DoS' mandate. In terms of preferred tools of strategic communications, there was an uptick in funding targeted to education and cultural exchange between 2003 (2.6 percent of the DoS budget) and 2006 (3.3 percent), though even this financing was down from the start of the period (4 percent in 1993). Disaggregated data for broadcasting, particularly VOA and RFE/RL, is not available after 1996.

Figure 4. U.S. Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy, 1980-2020 (constant USD 2021)



Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) in absolute dollars. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.

Figure 5. Illustrative Breakdown of Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy Activities by Sub-Category, 1993 only



Note: This visual shows the breakdown of individual line-items within the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) for the year 1993 only. Broadcast activities are shaded pink, exchange activities are shaded blue, while other administrative items from the public diplomacy budget are shaded gray. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.

4. Contemporary Period: U.S. Strategic Communications to Compete with Near Peers (2008-Present)

In the contemporary period, from 2008 to the present day, countering international terrorism continued to be a foreign policy priority for U.S. leaders. By extension, monitoring and countering the efforts of non-state actors like ISIS and al-Shabab to use digital communications channels to recruit terrorists and cultivate sympathizers for their cause were important emphases of U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts (Hoffman, 2017).³⁹

This period has also been marked by intensifying great power competition with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a bid for primacy that transcends traditional peace and war (Jones, 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Strategic communications are an essential capability in this struggle—both to proactively advance the U.S.' preferred narratives and build trust with target audiences, as well as resist and counter an increasing proliferation of disinformation which aims to disrupt societies and displace existing alliances. An examination of other great powers' strategic communications efforts in relation to U.S. interests is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be covered in depth by three companion works under the Gates Forum theme, *Assessing U.S. Strengths and Weaknesses vis-à-vis Strategic Competitors*. Instead, we will only touch on this here briefly in the context of how great power competition has shaped U.S. strategic communications' stated and revealed priorities, as well as day-to-day practice.

Irrespective of specific foreign policy priorities, professionalization of U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts—in light of an evolving digital communications space, changing audience demands, and optimal allocations for America's finite resources—were also an emphasis in this period. Congressionally mandated changes to the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the executive branch-led Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative were two of many reforms pursued to redefine how U.S. strategic communications was resourced, organized, and coordinated over the last decade.

³⁹ One of ISIS' propaganda mantras argues, "don't hear about us, hear from us," and al-Shabab live tweeted throughout the 2013 attack on Kenya's Westgate shopping center in 2013 to gain visibility for its own version of events for those that might support its efforts (Hoffman, 2017, p. 232-233).

4.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

At the start of the period, the BBG and the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs continued to be the primary conduits for U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts. There was also a fair degree of consistency in the regional priorities from the previous period, though the context shifted in later years from an initial counterterrorism emphasis on non-state actors towards great power competition and countering the influence of authoritarian regimes: Iran, the PRC, and Russia.

The Middle East and Afghanistan continued to be important in the eyes of Congressional and executive branch leaders, though Congress changed how it appropriated funding for broadcasting to the region. Instead of specific line items, appropriations legislation during this period favored more flexible language mandating the BBG (and its successor, the USAGM) to “make and supervise grants for radio and television broadcasting to the Middle East” as one of its responsibilities under “International Broadcasting Operations.”⁴⁰ Iran was an exception to this rule, as Congressional legislation sought to counter the Iranian regime’s influence in the region as a whole⁴¹ and specified funding for RFE/RL’s Radio Farda and VOA’s Persian News service.⁴²

With the PRC growing more assertive in projecting global influence, while constricting the free flow of information for its own citizens behind a Great Firewall, Congress prioritized broadcasting efforts in Asia by extending organizational mandates and legislating policies to confront the PRC. In 2010, Congress reaffirmed the RFA’s work since 1994 to provide accurate news services for countries where the free flow of information is compromised and authorized permanent funding for the broadcaster beyond the expiration of its initial mandate.⁴³ In response to the PRC’s treatment of

⁴⁰ Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, 2009; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, 2011; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, 2017; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, 2018; Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, 2019.

⁴¹ Although much of the emphasis in policy discussions related to disinformation have centered on Russia and the PRC, to a lesser extent, Iran is a major distributor of intentionally falsified content. For example, a Reuters special report on Iran’s disinformation distribution network found that the regime employs “over 70 websites affiliated with the International Union of Virtual Media based in Tehran to push out propaganda to 15 target countries” (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

⁴² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, 2009; Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, 2012.

⁴³ RFA’s initial mandate was scheduled to expire on September 30, 2010. A bill to permanently authorize Radio Free Asia and other purposes was passed in 2010.

ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang (including RFA journalists and their relatives living in China), Congress directed RFA to expand its Uyghur language service in 2020 and to commend its journalists operating in Xinjiang.⁴⁴

Seeking to counter the Kremlin's increased aggression, Congress had a renewed focus on Eastern Europe, enacted several pieces of legislation in the 2010s. This included directing the BBG and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to expand their broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts in countries in Russia's periphery, within Russia itself, and in its ally in Belarus. In 2012, Congress directed RFE/RL and VOA to initiate Belarusian language radio and TV broadcasts to counter President Alexander Lukashenko's repressive regime.⁴⁵ This was followed in 2014 by the Ukraine Freedom Support Act and the U.S. International Programming to Ukraine and Neighboring Regions bill which instructed the BBG and the NED to surge their programming in former Soviet states bordering Russia and support civil society programs in those countries.⁴⁶ Congress subsequently directly appropriated or transferred funds to operations in Eastern European states to counter Russian aggression in each of the next three years (2015-17).⁴⁷

As media consumers began to rely more on the Internet as a source for news, Congress passed legislation mandating that the BBG advocate for a free and open Internet and prioritize its digital media outputs. Beginning in 2010, Congress began appropriating funds to the NED to expand access to the Internet as a component of its efforts to promote democracy.⁴⁸ Open access to information via the Internet remained a priority through the end of the decade, with Congress regularly authorizing the BBG, and later the USAGM, to utilize funding appropriated initially for other purposes to research threats to Internet freedom and develop tools to circumvent those threats.⁴⁹ The U.S. has long been interested in ensuring citizens in countries with compromised information spaces can reliably access independent news, but pushing for greater Internet freedom

⁴⁴ Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020.

⁴⁵ Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, 2012.

⁴⁶ A bill entitled "United States International Programming to Ukraine and Neighboring Regions", 2014; Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014, 2014.

⁴⁷ Continuing Appropriations Resolution, 2015, 2014; Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, 2016; Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, 2017.

⁴⁸ Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010, 2009.

⁴⁹ Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011, 2011; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, 2017; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, 2018; Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, 2019; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, 2020; William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, 2021; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, 2022.

was also necessary to compete with authoritarian actors who exert extensive control over what their own citizens can access online, while exploiting the openness of other countries' information systems (Walker and Ludwig, 2017; Brandt, 2022).

In a similar vein, Congress passed the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act of 2016 to bolster the ability of the U.S. to identify and counter foreign propaganda and disinformation against the U.S. and to build the resilience of partner countries to do the same. The new legislation established the Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the State Department to synchronize interagency efforts to monitor, analyze, and respond to foreign propaganda and disinformation. The GEC was authorized to request US\$60 million annually for two years from the DoD to support its efforts. The proposed DoS Authorization Act of 2022 contains provisions to extend the GEC's mandate for a further three years and its special hiring authorities for an additional five years (Portman, 2022). However, President Joseph Biden's attempts to institute a domestically-focused Disinformation Governance Board under the Department of Homeland Security to combat false information and complement the GEC's international focus raised considerable pushback and was ultimately shut down a mere three weeks after it began (Cull, 2022).

Under the theme of promoting the professionalization of U.S. strategic communications, Congressional and executive branch leaders embarked on what would become one of the more controversial reforms of this period—abolishing the bipartisan nine-member BBG board and establishing a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position to be appointed by the President with the consent of Congress (Weed, 2016). Previously, concerns had been raised over a highly politicized and dysfunctional BBG board structure that featured nominations delayed for years, infighting between board members and with staff, “perceived interference” by board members in operations, and the lack of a strong executive (ibid).

There was also a desire to see the BBG become more efficient in targeting resources, as the GAO estimated that “two-thirds of the [agency's] services overlapped in language with another service”, and become more strategic in its use of new technologies (ibid). Relatedly, Congress had a growing interest in the potential for burden sharing with other like-minded democracies, such as the UK, France, and Germany, which all produce their own international broadcasting efforts (e.g., the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio France International, and Germany's Deutsche Welle).

Yet, the BBG often cited Congress's own restrictions via the appropriations process as hampering its ability to enact meaningful reforms. For example, the agency had long wanted to reduce its language service offerings and refocus resources away from short-wave radio to deliver news via social media and cell phones to be responsive to changes in audience consumption patterns (Weed, 2016). However, appropriations processes would often inhibit the BBG from making these changes—requiring the agency to sustain language offerings at current levels and resisting attempts to reduce radio coverage (ibid).⁵⁰

In the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Congress formalized the new CEO position, transferring all the powers that originally were held by the BBG board and more to the new role.⁵¹ The result was a far-reaching set of responsibilities and authorities, including the ability to: change the name of the agency, appoint the heads of federal (VOA, OCB) and grantee (RFE/RL, RFA, MBN) broadcasters, establish new broadcasters, appoint the board of any broadcaster, condition future grant funding on the merger of broadcasters, and direct all broadcasting activities under the agency's purview (Weed, 2021). This legislation required the President to establish a five-member advisory board to assist the CEO, including the Secretary of State (or their designee) and four other individuals.⁵²

In reality, this process of bringing online a new CEO role to oversee U.S. international broadcasting efforts began much earlier. The BBG began crafting the role as early as 2011, as it sought to provide stronger executive leadership in day-to-day operations of the agency and free up the board to “focus on strategic direction and oversight” (Weed, 2021). By 2015, the BBG's board had preemptively created and filled the CEO position before Congress had even authorized it in legislation (ibid), voluntarily devolving many of its authorities to the new role between 2015-2020, before Michael

⁵⁰ According to Weed (2016), some, though not all, of the overlapping language service offerings stem from legislation that bifurcates VOA coverage (with a mandate to present news on U.S. policy to the world) from that of the network/grantee broadcasters (with a mandate to serve almost as an alternative source of local news in countries with a less free media). With regard to shifting from short-wave radio to social media and cellphone delivery of news, proponents of that strategy cite declining use of short-wave outside of Africa, while those in opposition remain concerned that newer technologies are less resistant to jamming (ibid).

⁵¹ The nine-member board was originally composed of eight members appointed by the President with the consent of the Senate and the Director of the USIA (later the BBG). National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, 2016; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

⁵² The legislation specifies that board members should be U.S. citizens who are not full-time Federal employees at the time of their selection and are recognized as experts in public diplomacy by the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, Ranking Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, or the Ranking Member of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

Pack assumed office in June 2020 during the administration of President Donald Trump (ibid).

Initially, there were positive reviews of the transition of oversight for day-to-day operations from the BBG board to the CEO position. Two separate DoS Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports conducted in 2019 and 2020 found that the acting CEOs John Lansing and Grant Turner had helped improve executive direction of the agency (renamed the U.S. Agency for Global Media, USAGM, in 2018), while maintaining journalistic standards and independence (Weed, 2021). This rosy outlook changed shortly after Michael Pack's arrival in June 2020. As the first Senate-confirmed CEO, Pack "represented a test of the expanded executive powers and position" (ibid).

Pack announced three goals for his tenure—increase effectiveness, no interference in news reporting, and improve morale—before applying the CEO's newly vested authorities to enact far-reaching changes across the agency and its broadcasters (Weed, 2021). Within a month of taking office, Pack removed the heads of RFE/RL, RFA, and MBN (ibid). He dismissed the incumbent boards of the grantee broadcasters (replacing them with his own selections), suspended numerous USAGM executives, removed the VOA standards editor, withheld funding from grantee broadcasters, and allowed the work visas for 100 foreign USAGM employees to expire, triggering their employment termination (ibid). Pack repealed the so-called firewall regulation,⁵³ which protected newsroom operations from interference in programming, and modified the corporate by-laws and agreements with grantee broadcasters to prevent any changes for at least two years and only for cause thereafter (ibid).⁵⁴

In response to perceived overreach by Pack, Congress enacted amendments to the 1994 International Broadcasting Act within the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 with the intent of safeguarding journalistic independence and curbing the USAGM CEO's authorities in some areas (Weed, 2021). This tumultuous period may explain why President Biden, upon taking office, slow-rolled the process of nominating a new Senate-confirmed CEO to immediately take over for Pack, instead installing

⁵³ As Pomar (2021) describes, the firewall was intended to maintain sharp distinctions between federal broadcasters such as the VOA and private grantees such as RFE/RL, RFA, and MDB.

⁵⁴ After a raft of whistleblower complaints were filed against Pack, inquiries conducted by the U.S. Office of the Special Counsel in 2020 and the State OIG in 2021 found no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the terminated and suspended employees, instead determining that they were the targets of reprisals by Pack.

acting CEO Kelu Chao. In late September 2022, the Senate confirmed Biden’s ultimate nominee for the post, Amanda Bennet (a former VOA Director).

Comparatively, reforms to U.S. public diplomacy efforts under the DoS during this period were less politically fraught and lower profile outside of the agency, but no less impactful. Driven by the executive branch, reforms centered around ensuring that the DoS complement of field-based public diplomacy professionals were well equipped for the 21st century and instituting the merger of the agency’s DC-based Bureaus of Public Affairs (PA) and International Information Programs (IIP).

In FY2014, the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources under the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R/PPR) quietly embarked on a human resources initiative to revise the position titles and job descriptions of 2,600 locally employed (LE) staff in 186 missions worldwide that had not been updated since the 1970s (OIG, 2021).⁵⁵ By FY2020, this effort was integrated within a comprehensive PD modernization agenda for the digital age including elements focused on updated tools, training and professional development, and revisions to PD roles.

With estimated completion by the end of 2023,⁵⁶ the Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative (PDSI) has been described as “one of the most important transformations in U.S. public diplomacy since the merger of USIA into DoS in 1999” (ACPD, 2021a). The PDSI seeks to make DoS public diplomacy “audience focused [and] results-driven” in a dramatically different information space than the last century (OIG, 2021). With this end in mind, DoS strategic planning documents for 2020 set out to: restructure public diplomacy (PD) operations within U.S. missions abroad around audiences, content, and resources rather than traditional functions or programs; revise staff position descriptions to emphasize PD skills and responsibilities; and facilitate closer linkages and collaboration between PD personnel and other mission staff (OIG, 2021, ACPD, 2021a).

The PDSI aspired to address one of the chronic challenges that has hamstrung U.S. strategic communications capabilities since the merger of the USIA into the DoS in 1991: how PD professionals are recruited, trained, evaluated, and integrated in ways

⁵⁵ Given relatively short rotation schedules and a dearth of experienced PD-focused foreign service officers, local PD employees hold even greater importance in providing “continuity and consistency in executing...programming” (ACPD, 2021).

⁵⁶ As of February 2022, the ACPD annual report for 2021 disclosed that DoS had completed implementation of the PDSI at 17 missions and initiated the process at 19 additional missions. It will begin implementing PDSI in the remaining 47 posts in 2022 (ACPD, 2022).

that best advance America's foreign policy goals. One of the implications of the shift of personnel from the oversight of the USIA to the DoS was the dilution of the public diplomacy aspects of their jobs. This included the treatment of public diplomacy officers (PDOs) as managers to tackle administrative responsibilities,⁵⁷ the exclusion of PD competencies within the evaluation systems used to determine promotions and compensation,⁵⁸ and a mismatch in placement of PDOs in non-PD positions, despite chronic shortages of experienced PD professionals (Nakamura and Weed, 2016).⁵⁹

The PDSI replaced a "50-year old legacy structure" inherited from the USIA (Figure 6), departing from the traditional bifurcation between information and cultural functions and emphasizing digital over analog technologies (ACPD, 2021a). The revised structure affects all mission staff, and though the new job descriptions pertain only to local employees, it is hoped that this will create a catalyst in future to revise FSO positions and also DC-based operations (ibid). The DoS also pursued complementary efforts to improve PD training (via a new Foreign Service Institute PDO tradecraft course) and evidence-based decision making (via a Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation unit in Education and Cultural Affairs).

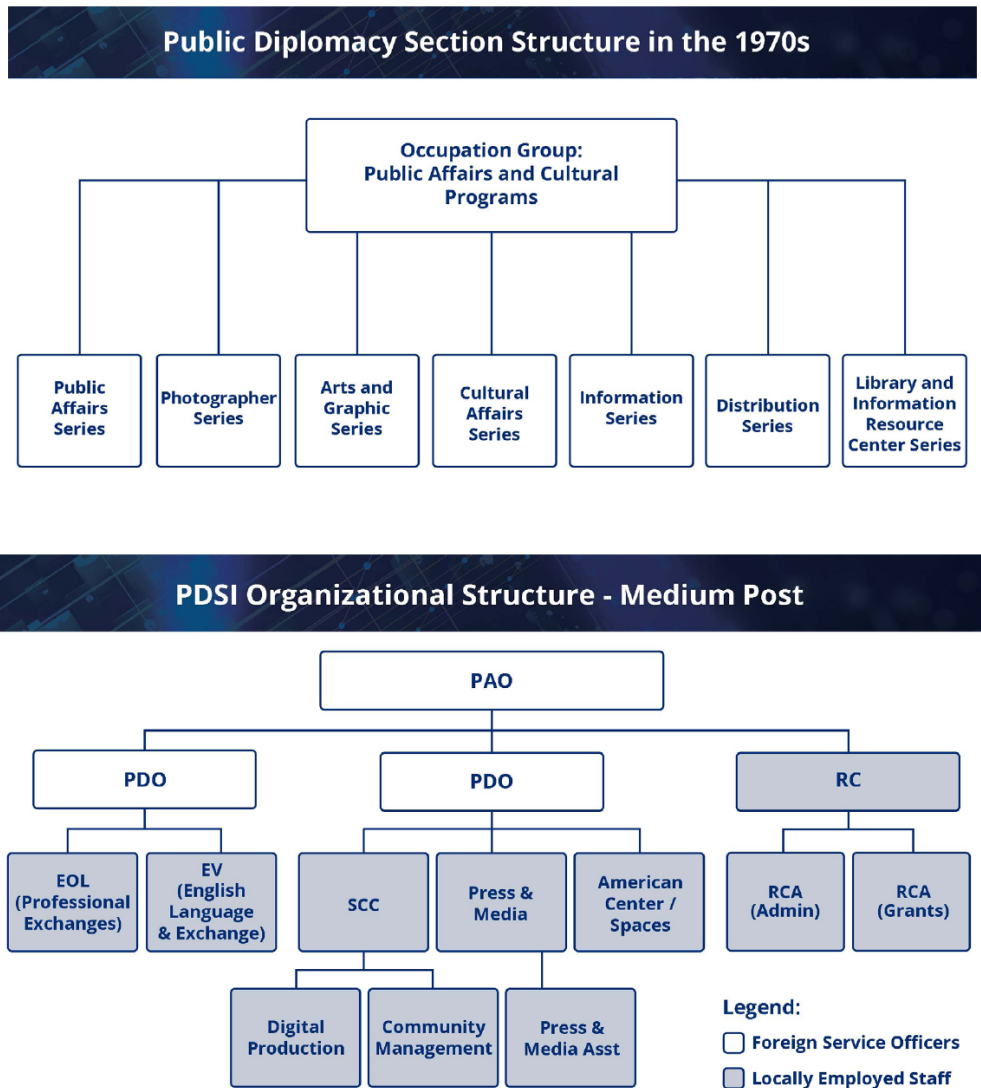
Earlier evaluations conducted by the OIG (2021) and the Advisory Council on Public Diplomacy (2021) indicate that while the PDSI has made important strides in modernizing PD within the DoS for the 21st century, it still has some pain points to navigate in realizing its goals. Particularly, these early evaluations indicate the need for: stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; more robust training to support local audience analysis; better coordination with regional bureaus and embassy management to overcome resistance to changes; and fewer disconnects between field and domestic PD structures, as PDSI exclusively focused on the former without tackling the latter (ibid).

⁵⁷ For example, Nakamura and Weed (2009) report that in the "work requirements statements of some PDOs, only 1 of 11 job requirements described substantive public diplomacy outreach and nine were administrative in nature."

⁵⁸ Nakamura and Weed (2009) report the concern that PDOs are "promoted at the lowest rate of any professional track" within the DoS and that the "employee evaluation report (EER) used to determine promotions does not contain a section devoted to public diplomacy" competencies.

⁵⁹ Given the low career advancement rate for PDOs within DoS, it is perhaps unsurprising to hear that Nakamura and Weed (2009) also report chronic staffing shortages for PD staff as the number of both "civil servants and locally engaged staff assigned" to, or specializing in PD has plummeted compared to the Cold War. Yet, there is also a severe mismatch between the supply and demand for PDOs that do exist. Nakamura and Weed report that PDO position vacancies" ranged near 20 percent in recent years" on the one hand, and yet a large percentage of PDOs end up placed in non-PD positions, like general FSOs with other specializations are shoe-horned to fill the PD vacancies.

Figure 6. Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative Changes to Field-Based PD Structures, 1970s vs 2021



Source: This image is from the Advisory Council for Public Diplomacy's 2021 Special Report "Putting Policy and Audience First: A Public Policy Paradigm Shift." Notes: The visual compares the structure and positions of PD-focused operations under the USIA in the 1970s versus the new PDSI structure for field operations in 2021. Acronyms: PAO: Public Affairs Officer; PDO: Public Diplomacy Officer; RC: Resource Coordination; EOL: Established Opinion Leaders; and SCC: Strategic Content Coordination.

The second major SC-related reform at the DoS in recent years was the May 2019 creation of the Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA) from the merger of the former Bureaus of Public Affairs and International Information Programs. This organizational shift was described by DoS itself as "the largest restructuring at the State Department in

the last 20 years” (DoS, 2017-2020). PA was always housed within the DoS since its formation in 1944 with a mandate to engage “domestic and international media and the American public to communicate official U.S. foreign policy” (ibid). IIP, by contrast, was grafted into the agency with the 1999 merger with the USIA and had a remit to “support people-to-people conversations and other engagement with foreign audiences about U.S. policy priorities and values” (ibid).

The argument given for the restructure was to increase the speed and efficiency of DoS global communications efforts at the “tempo of modern diplomacy;” the move affected “more than 500 positions across five bureaus or offices” (ibid). The new bureau oversees the U.S. and international media strategy, including six regional media hubs and two Foreign Press Centers; however, it redistributed several other programmatic functions such as American Spaces, the U.S. Speaker Program, TechCamps, and the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy to other bureaus (ibid).⁶⁰

Beyond the BBG/USAGM and the DoS, the DoD’s role in SC continued to expand during this period, building upon a trajectory that began with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The DoD spent an estimated US\$10 billion on information operations between 2001-2009 (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). Although it does not disclose its spending on SC and PD within its annual budget requests to Congress, this conservative estimate would put DoD allocations in this area at approximately US\$1.1 billion a year on average. It is perhaps unsurprising that one of the arguments that has been given for the DoD to play an active supporting role in U.S. strategic communications is to augment the more limited resources available to civilian efforts.

The DoD played a significant leadership role in SC in other respects beyond budgets. It issued guidance for its headquarters staff and regional combatant commands, such as the 2008 Principles of Strategic Communication, the 2008 Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept (JIC), and the Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communications, which built upon an earlier 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Strategic Communications Execution Roadmap that sought to operationalize the DoD’s

⁶⁰ The Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau took on American Spaces, the U.S. Speaker Program, and TechCamps. The Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs absorbed the Advisory Commission on PD, along with other programs.

commitments in areas outlined by the QDR pertaining to strategic communications.⁶¹ The DoD also experimented with coordination mechanisms internal to the agency (the Global Strategic Engagement Team) and across the interagency (the Global Strategic Engagement Coordinating Committee, established in 2009 under Michele Flournoy, after she abolished the office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Support to Public Diplomacy created in 2007).⁶²

Yet the DoD's outsized role in nonmilitary communications and public diplomacy activities is not without controversy, particularly among those concerned about creating confusion or stoking distrust among target audiences. The root of this concern stems from the fact that the DoD has a unique dual-role in this realm that is different from its civilian counterparts. In addition to its work to "inform foreign publics about America and U.S. policies in a truthful manner" it also engages in covert activities, including the use of deception in information operations to achieve military objectives (Nakamura and Weed, 2009).

The executive branch experimented with a variety of ad hoc mechanisms for interagency coordination of U.S. strategic communications efforts during this period. In 2009, President Barack Obama established the Global Engagement Directorate (GED) within the NSC with a stated mandate to "drive comprehensive engagement policies that leverage diplomacy, communications, international development and assistance, and domestic engagement and outreach in pursuit of a host of national security objectives" (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). Obama envisioned the NSC holding "weekly interagency policy committee meetings...on public diplomacy and strategic communications issues" (ibid). One of the first tasks facing the GED was producing a new national strategy for PD and SC, required by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2009, given their assessment that the 2007 strategy was "deficient in construction and implementation" (ibid).

⁶¹ The Principles document was intended to "standardize SC education;" the JIC was more of an operational document laying out "challenges, solutions, capabilities, and resources required for a joint force commander to implement a comprehensive approach to SC" alongside civilian counterparts; the Handbook was a reference guide that incorporated best practices and organizational processes for SC; and the Roadmap delineated 55 specific tasks, with accompanying plans and milestones for completion (Nakamura and Weed, 2009).

⁶² Nakamura and Weed (2009) note that, in a review of the previous Office of Support to Public Diplomacy, concerns were raised regarding its performance, particularly its failure to meet "DoD standards of accuracy and transparency in the guidance provided to military commanders."

The last three administrations each appointed an individual to serve as the point person for strategic communications within the NSC, envisioned as coordinating interagency efforts.⁶³ Yet, an Achilles’ heel for these coordination efforts was a chronic leadership vacuum within the DoS, as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has remained unfilled for “roughly 40 percent of the time since its inception” (ACPD, 2022a). As the senior DoS leader for strategic communications, the Under Secretary directs the agency’s own public diplomacy efforts, has been tapped to coordinate the efforts of other agencies, and often represents the DoS on the BBG (later the USAGM) board.

Although the DoS has an acting Under Secretary step in, in the absence of a Senate-confirmed incumbent, these individuals typically lack the authority, mandate, and personal relationships with the White House of a political appointee. The absence of this role and the relatively short tenures of those who have held it—517 days on average (MountainRunner.us, 2022)—are major impediments to direction setting, interagency coordination, and reforming U.S. strategic communications to be efficient and effective in advancing America’s foreign policy goals. Table 2 breaks down the position holders and vacancy rates for the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs position by administration.

Table 2. Missing in Action: Vacancy Rates of the Senior DoS Leader Role for Strategic Communications

President	Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Position holders	Days position filled	Days position unfilled	% of days position vacant
George W. Bush (2001-2009)	Charlotte Beers (Oct 2, 2001 - Mar 28, 2003) Margaret Tutwiler (Dec 16, 2003 - Jun 30, 2004) Karen Hughes (Jul 29, 2005 - Dec 14, 2007) James Glassman (Jun 5, 2008 - Jan 16, 2009)	1832 days	1084 days	37%
Barack Obama (2009-2017)	Judith McHale (May 26, 2009 - Jun 30, 2011) Tara Sonenshine (Apr 5, 2012 - Jul 1, 2013) Richard Stengel (Feb 12, 2014 - Dec 7, 2016)	2246 days	626 days	22%
Donald Trump (2017-2021)	Steve Goldstein (Dec 3, 2017 - Mar 13, 2018)	100 days	1312 days	93%
Joseph Biden (2021-present)	None	0 days	641 days	100%

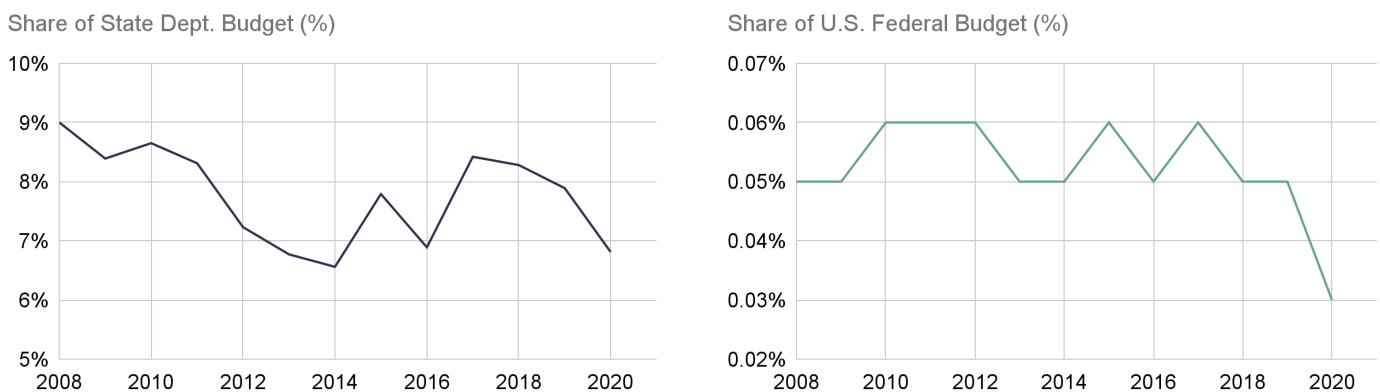
⁶³ For example: Ben Rhodes (Obama administration), Monica Crowley (Trump administration), John Kirby (Biden administration).

Source: This table has been adapted and aggregated from source inputs gathered by Matt Armstrong, who has meticulously tracked the vacancy rates for the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the Department of State since 2011 (MountainRunner.us, 2022).

4.2 Revealed Priorities

Similar to the dynamics observed in the post Cold War and 9/11 period, funding for U.S. strategic communications from 2008 onwards was driven by two conflicting trends: budgets increased in absolute dollar terms, but the share of resourcing strategic communications received declined yet again. On the one hand, absolute funding remained steady, with a modest increase from US\$1.7 to US\$1.9 billion (constant USD 2021) annually on average over the thirteen years of available data for 2008-2020. In fact, SC funding levels for the years of 2010 and 2017 were nearly identical to the previous high point of 1994, all hovering around approximately US\$2.1 billion (constant USD 2021). Yet, this rosy picture belies a more sobering reality: the U.S. was focusing less and less on strategic communications as a relative share of its overall spending. Continuing the slide that began in the 1990s, U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy accounted for roughly 9 percent of the State Department budget in 2009, dropping to just 7 percent by 2020 (Figure 7).

Figure 7. U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Share of the Department of State and Federal Budgets, 2008-2020



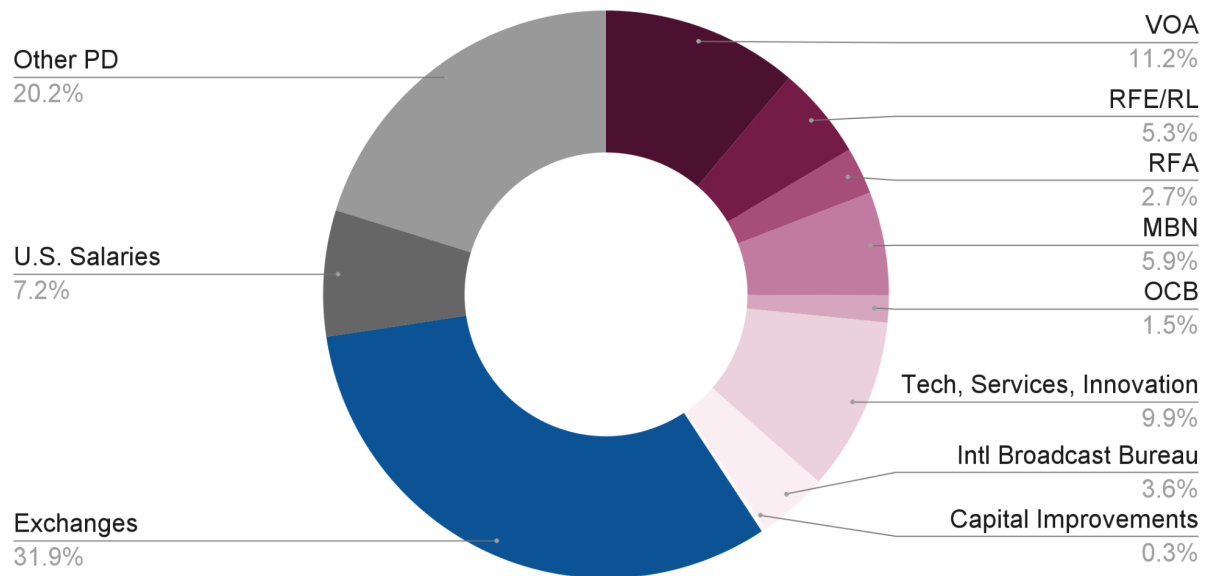
Notes: The left-hand visual shows the budget for international broadcasting and public diplomacy overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a percentage of the Department of State budget for 2008 to 2020. The right-hand visual shows the budget for international broadcasting and public diplomacy as a percentage of total federal expenditures. Underlying financial data was deflated to constant USD 2021. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports.

Part of this decline may reflect shifting priorities within the U.S. strategic communications toolkit. In the previous two eras, international broadcasting received far more funding than education and cultural exchange (ECE) activities. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was not uncommon for international broadcasting to attract nearly double the resources of ECE programming, for example.⁶⁴ U.S. leaders at that time likely prioritized building shallow ties with large networks of listeners at a distance over cultivating deeper ties with a small number of individuals. However, it also reflects a difference in the cost structures of these activities. Broadcasting operations involve capital-intensive investments to continuously produce and disseminate high quality content over vast geographies. Comparatively, ECE activities have more predictable year-on-year costs per participant (albeit still affected by inflation and rising tuition costs).

In the contemporary period, ECE and broadcasting portfolios reached near parity. Between 2014 and 2020, ECE funds made up 2.3 percent of the total State Department budget on average, while broadcasting funds accounted for 2.8 percent: roughly US\$701 million versus US\$854 million respectively (constant USD 2021). This shift may have to do with cost savings from the adoption of digital technologies in international broadcasting to reduce the capital-intensive nature of programming previously described. This trend could also reflect a strategic pivot away from the mass-media broadcasting that defined much of the Cold War era effort to more targeted efforts to cultivate people-to-people ties with public diplomacy. Alternatively, these changing costs could be the natural extension of the efforts to reform U.S. international broadcasting which emphasized consolidation and privatization of the various U.S. broadcasters, particularly grantees that served as surrogate news sources for countries with less free media to choose from (e.g., RFE/RL).

⁶⁴ International broadcasting received 199 percent of ECE financing in 1983, 246 percent in 1989, 237 percent in 1991, and 189 percent in 1993.

Figure 8. Breakdown of Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy Activities by Sub-Category, 2014 Only



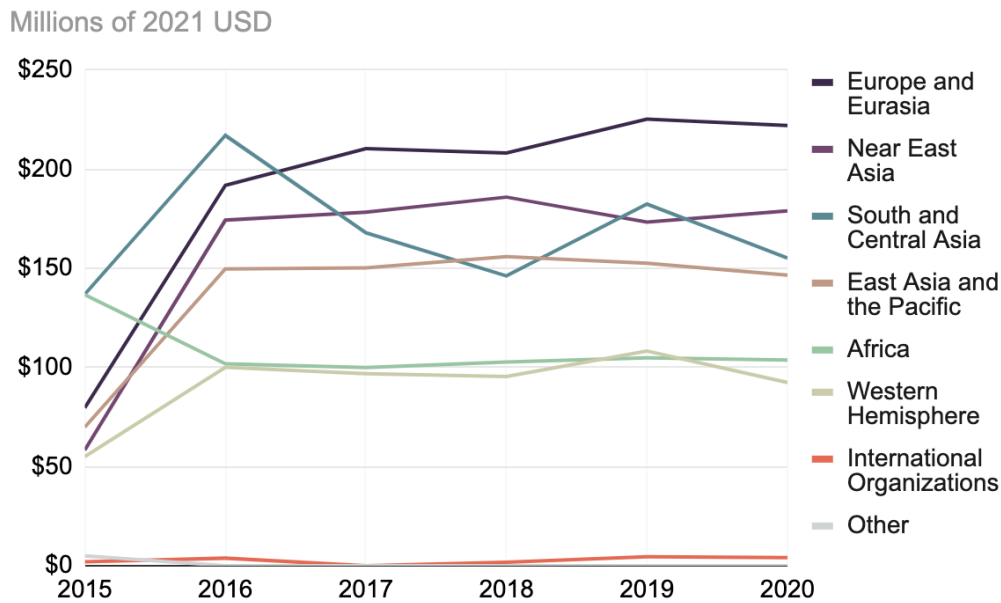
Note: This visual shows the breakdown of individual line items within the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) for the year 2014 only. Broadcast activities are shaded pink, exchange activities are shaded blue, while other administrative items from the public diplomacy budget are shaded gray. Underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.

Taking a more granular look at the line-item budgets, VOA (the flagship broadcaster) eclipsed the combined budgets of RFE/RL and RFA in 2020, while it previously was about at parity with the two broadcasters in the 1990s.⁶⁵ VOA's geographic emphasis might offer a clue as to what drove this relative increase in its budget: roughly one-third of its financial resources were focused on Asia (both South and Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific) in recent years, in line with the stated priorities of U.S. leaders to focus on countering the PRC's influence in the region.⁶⁶ This emphasis on Asia was not unique to VOA and broadcasting, but extended to other aspects of the U.S. strategic communications portfolio as well (Figure 9).

⁶⁵ While the two outlets had roughly equal budgets in the 1990s, in 2020 VOA's budget of US\$264.4 million exceeded the combined budget of RFE/RL and RFA (US\$176.4 million). VOA claimed 11 percent of the DoS Public Diplomacy budget, while the radios only captured 8 percent.

⁶⁶ Thirty-two percent of VOA's 2014 budget went to its South Asia and EAP divisions, and 31 percent of the VOA budget went to those two divisions in 2020 (US\$73.4 million and US\$81.9 million, respectively).

Figure 9. Regional Breakdown of Public Diplomacy Financing (Excluding Broadcasting), 2015-2020



Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian public diplomacy efforts (educational and cultural affairs spending, exclusive of broadcasting) overseen by the Department of State broken down by region for years 2015-2020. A comparable regional breakdown for international broadcasting is unavailable for this time period. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Region names reflect State department regional groupings, as reflected in line items at the time. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from State Department reports.

Beyond financing, VOA also has the highest share of human resources at its disposal, compared to the grantee broadcasters (Table 3). In FY2021, VOA had roughly the same number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions as RFE/RL and RFA combined. That said, taking the long-view from fiscal year 2008 through 2021, the most recent year of data available, we can see that VOA has a dwindling share of people power to support its programming, shedding 248 FTEs over the 14-year period.

The Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB) also saw a drop in its available workforce by 69 positions. Although the absolute number is relatively smaller than VOA, this loss is likely more consequential for the OCB, as it began with a relatively smaller staff. Its budget was correspondingly reduced by US\$5.6 million between 2014 and 2020 (US\$31.6 million to US\$26.0 million, constant USD 2021). The drop-off since 1993 is even sharper, as the combined budget of TV and Radio Martí that year was US\$69.0 million (constant USD 2021). This refocusing appears to be consistent with an overall deprioritization of the Western hemisphere in the stated priorities of Congressional and executive branch

leaders as they looked farther afield to the Middle East and Asia in light of concerns related to international terrorism and great power competition, respectively.

At the topline level, Europe and Eurasia still received the highest total disbursements, US\$1.05 billion, between 2015 and 2020, and the broadcasters focused on this region, RFE/RL, saw an uptick in personnel numbers by the end of the period. In terms of human resources, MBN came out ahead, netting the largest increase in workforce across all the broadcasters from the beginning to the end of the period.

Table 3. Positions for U.S. International Broadcasters, by Network, FY2009-2021

Network	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	Change From Start to End of Period
VOA	1,197	1193	1230	1206	NA	1117	1115	1,089	1,074	1,096	1,020	971	981	949	-248
MBN	473	657	753	768	NA	771	792	814	869	884	750	725	713	759	286
RFE/RL	480	481	545	511	NA	487	503	571	623	666	698	699	695	696	216
RFA	252	265	266	267	NA	253	240	264	253	262	263	274	272	292	40
OCB	157	151	128	126	NA	116	126	130	117	120	108	100	88	88	-69

Notes: This visual shows the number of full-time equivalent positions (for both U.S. and local staff) for VOA and each of the grantee broadcasters within the BBG/USAGM network. Please note that VOA has a separate entry for full-time equivalents versus number of positions; we use the former as a more precise estimate of personnel complement. The grantee broadcasters only provide the number of positions without specifying whether those roles are part- or full-time. Sources: Numbers of positions were sourced from the yearly actuals reported in Congressional Budget Justifications (CBJ) for U.S. government fiscal years 2008-2021, as published on the USAGM website. No data was available for FY12. We exclude CBJ estimates for FY22 and FY23, which are available on the website but are only projections and do not yet have posted actuals. Data was manually collected and aggregated for inclusion in this report by AidData staff.

5. Results and Lessons

Despite being under-resourced and over-stretched for many decades, a snapshot of international broadcasting and public diplomacy in 2021 shows a formidable set of assets that U.S. leaders can employ to advance America's foreign policy goals (Table 4). Influence with foreign leaders and publics is clearly central to U.S. national security, as underscored in the last five National Security Strategy (NSS) documents released by the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. If changing the attitudes or behaviors of these target audiences is paramount to securing our national interests, then strategic communications is indispensable to that objective.

Table 4. A Snapshot of the U.S. Civilian Strategic Communications Footprint as of 2021

Broadcasting:

- Six networks with channels across various digital and analog platforms
- Broadcasting 3,000 weekly hours of original programming in 62 languages
- Reaching a weekly audience of 354 million people in 100+ countries

Public Diplomacy:

- 90 exchange programs with nearly 55,000 U.S. and foreign participants
- 630 American Spaces conducting 427,000+ programs for 14.5 million participants
- 1.1 million international students studying within U.S. higher education
- 200 U.S. mission websites in 59 languages with 80 million website visitors

Source: The Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy's 2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting (FY2020 budget data) (ACPD, 2022).

At the end of the day, the success or failure of SC to influence foreign publics rests not on upstream inputs—discrete broadcasting or public diplomacy activities that we control—but the downstream outcomes of how target audiences' attitudes or behaviors change in response to these efforts. In this concluding section, we assess lessons from past U.S. strategic communications practice to inform how we strengthen America's capabilities in future. Specifically, we consider the following questions:

- To what extent did U.S. leaders follow through in mobilizing human and financial resources to achieve their stated strategic communications priorities (Consistency)?

- To what extent did U.S. leaders ensure that our strategic communications messaging aligned with America’s broader policies, values, and practices (Coherence)?
- To what extent did U.S. strategic communications efforts reach the intended target audiences and with what response (Salience)?
- To what extent did U.S. strategic communications efforts ultimately change the behaviors or attitudes of foreign publics in ways that advanced U.S. foreign policy goals and interests (Effectiveness)?

5.1 Consistency of Follow-Through from Stated to Revealed Priorities

The Cold War period was the high point in alignment between what U.S. political leaders said they wanted to achieve (counter the USSR’s influence) and their follow-through in mobilizing resources and political attention to operationalize these goals in practice. International broadcasting and public diplomacy commanded the highest shares of the State Department budget and federal spending at this time. Interagency coordination was aided by close working relationships between the director of the USIA and the White House, a single animating purpose, and the President’s personal involvement. Of course, even then, U.S. strategic communications was still vulnerable to politics—from criticism that cultural diplomacy was a guise for “leftwing propaganda” and clashes over VOA coverage of specific events⁶⁷ to restrictions on the use of funds or sharing materials related to broadcasting and public diplomacy activities at home, which made it difficult to mobilize a domestic constituency (Cull, 2022).⁶⁸

The immediate post Cold War period was marked by two competing dynamics—consolidation and fragmentation—that influenced how U.S. leaders directed human and financial resources for strategic communications. Broadcasting entities were merged, governing structures dissolved, and some legacy outlets privatized in pursuit of cost cutting measures. Yet, U.S. leaders also encouraged a proliferation of activities targeting a much broader range of topics and audiences than had been the case

⁶⁷ This was true over domestic events, such as reporting on Vietnam and Watergate, as well as international events related to the USSR or China. As Cull (2022) describes, tensions over reporting ultimately prompted “bipartisan sponsorship of the VOA charter being written into law.”

⁶⁸ This included revisions to the Smith-Mundt Act in the 1970s, but even prior to this, a surge in partisanship during the 1960s triggered legislation which specified that USIA films could only be shown domestically with a special act of Congress (Cull, 2022).

before. The net effect of these two imperatives set the stage for an overstretched, under-resourced, and unfocused strategic communications that became a vulnerability.

The 9/11 attacks radically changed the strategic landscape, provoking substantial introspection among U.S. leaders as to how such an event could have occurred. Financing for broadcasting and public diplomacy increased, though never regaining the share of the budget it had during the Cold War. An ever growing number of actors within (e.g., USAID, the Peace Corps, the DoD) and outside (e.g., private sector companies, educational organizations, women business leaders, Muslim-Americans) of government were mobilized to be part of the solution. New coordination committees and national SC strategies were formed, though questions soon ensued over their effectiveness. Consistent with challenges in the earlier Cold War period, SC practitioners continued to be hampered in increasing the visibility of and support for their work from domestic constituencies, due to strict limitations on their operations domestically.⁶⁹

Arguably, the greatest disconnect between what America says it wants to achieve (greater influence with foreign leaders and publics) and its revealed priorities is the most egregious in the modern era. In this present “age of persistent, asymmetric competition” over shaping media narratives and public opinion (Brandt, 2022), the U.S. only budgeted between 3 and 6 cents on civilian-led strategic communications for every 100 federal dollars spent. Even as a share of the State Department budget, broadcasting and public diplomacy commands a mere 7 percent.

The October 2022 NSS released by the Biden administration views “influence” as a key objective (eight mentions)⁷⁰ and acknowledges that America’s contestation with near peer competitors will likely play out in the “information” domain (17 mentions).⁷¹ Yet, in

⁶⁹ The 1985 Zorinsky amendment banned the USIA from conducting activities domestically, while the 1994 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act restricted the use of public diplomacy funds for Department of State to be used domestically and banned the distribution or dissemination of any related programming materials (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). The Clinton administration initially proposed an integrated structure for domestic and international public diplomacy efforts in the National Security Decision Document 68 in 1998, but this attracted substantial resistance which ultimately resulted in it going nowhere (CRS, 2006).

⁷⁰ A keyword search for “influence” generated eight results, most often referring to the PRC’s or the Kremlin’s influence over international institutions and other countries, the importance of investing in the underlying sources and tools of American power and influence (undefined), the need to influence the PRC’s and the Kremlin’s external environment, and the need to build a strong coalition of nations to advance our collective influence.

⁷¹ “Information” was referenced 17 times, most often in the context of safeguarding the free flow of information without manipulation, the threat of adversaries seeking to weaponize information to undermine democracies, the risk of disinformation crowding out credible news, and the importance of sharing information and intelligence with our partners to subvert terrorist plots and malign influence.

our highest-order national security blueprint to achieve influence, strategic communications was oddly out of sight and out of mind. The typical hallmarks of a strategy to influence counterparts—audiences, messages, messengers, attitudes, and perceptions—failed to make an appearance.⁷² “Communications” was referenced only with regard to telecommunications and 5G.⁷³ America’s key tools to forge goodwill, common values, and shared narratives—“public diplomacy” and “broadcasting”—did not warrant a mention,⁷⁴ though references were made to the importance of maintaining the integrity of the media environment.

Infinite aspirations of influence (vaguely defined), limited resources (vulnerable to further cuts), and lack of specificity about how we should define success (what influence, with whom, how, and to what ends) create an unwinnable scenario that risks repeating the same mistakes that have plagued U.S. strategic communications over the last several decades. Although insufficient resources are challenging, merely throwing more money and people at the problem is unlikely to succeed without ensuring the coherence of our messaging and actions, the salience of our content with target audiences, and the effectiveness of our efforts to not only produce outputs but achieve outcomes in line with U.S. goals and interests.

Getting this right requires something more than just resources alone—it also requires leadership, coordination, and accountability. As Gates (2021) observes, when all the instruments of foreign policy work together, they can have the power and impact of a symphony. The opposite is also true: that when these instruments work at cross-purposes with one another, the notes they produce are discordant rather than harmonious. Unfortunately, America is falling short in all three of these areas and has been for some time.

⁷² “Message” was referenced once in the context of the “historic global response to Russia’s war against Ukraine [which] sends a resounding message that countries cannot enjoy the benefits of global integration while trampling on the core tenets of the UN Charter.” “Audience,” “messenger,” “story,” “attitudes,” “reputation,” and “perceptions” were not mentioned, other than one reference to “threat perception.”

⁷³ “Communications” was referenced nine times in the context of improving telecommunications and 5G capabilities, next-generation communications, and modernizing nuclear-related communications, though “crisis communications” was also mentioned.

⁷⁴ Neither “public diplomacy” nor “broadcast” warranted a mention; “exchanges” was mentioned once in a list of programs.

5.2 Coherence Between America’s Messaging and Actions

U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy generated positive responses from foreign publics when these overtures were authentic and truthful in talking about difficulties America faced—from civil rights unrest to the Watergate scandals—as opposed to sweeping political topics under the proverbial rug. When USIA research surfaced that racial segregation undercut U.S. credibility with foreign publics, particularly in Africa, this spurred a change in approach within the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.⁷⁵ Discontent with the U.S. during Vietnam was less an indication of discontent with the coverage of VOA and RFE/RL, which audiences viewed as “credible and honest journalism,” but rather the appearance of hypocrisy between America’s values and its actions in the war (Pomar, 2021). The U.S. regained some credibility in the eyes of foreign publics as they saw America living out its values in its willingness to begin impeachment proceedings against President Nixon over the Watergate scandal and his ultimate resignation. Consistent across these examples is foreign publics’ lack of tolerance for inconsistency between rhetoric and action, but acceptance and even admiration when the U.S. is seen as acknowledging our faults and following through on our values.

Yet, the response to worsening public opinion towards the U.S. in the post Cold War and 9/11 period was the instinct to go for the hard sell of a highly curated Brand America, in the absence of talking about root sources of discontent in the relationship between America and the Arab and Muslim world.⁷⁶ U.S. leaders unintentionally squandered an unprecedented outpouring of international support.⁷⁷ Characterizing America’s response to 9/11 as a “crusade” (CRS, 2006)⁷⁸ against an “axis of evil” was perceived as a “full-fledged assault on Islam” that focused on terrorism at the expense of ignoring underlying causes of conflict and discord with the U.S (Zaharna, 2010). Instead of rebuilding trust, pre-existing stereotypes that Americans and Arabs had of each other became entrenched, as both sides retreated to an “us versus them” posture

⁷⁵ Key informant interviews with external experts.

⁷⁶ As CRS (2006) notes, America’s refusal to support the “Kyoto Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Chemical Weapons Ban, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty” attracted substantial negative sentiment abroad. This uptick in expressed discontent with U.S. foreign policy is particularly striking, considering that approval of the U.S. had been quite favorable at the end of the Cold War, when between 50-83 percent of foreign publics viewed the America favorably, according to a Pew Survey conducted in 1999-2000 (ibid).

⁷⁷ Polling showed the world “rallying behind America,” with two-thirds of opinion leaders across 24 countries saying that most people were sympathetic to the U.S. (Zaharna, 2010).

⁷⁸ In his September 2001 speech, Bush initially referred to “this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.” The naming of the War on Terror went through various iterations, “Operation Enduring Crusade,” “Operation Infinite Justice,” before landing on “Operation Enduring Freedom.” (CRS, 2006).

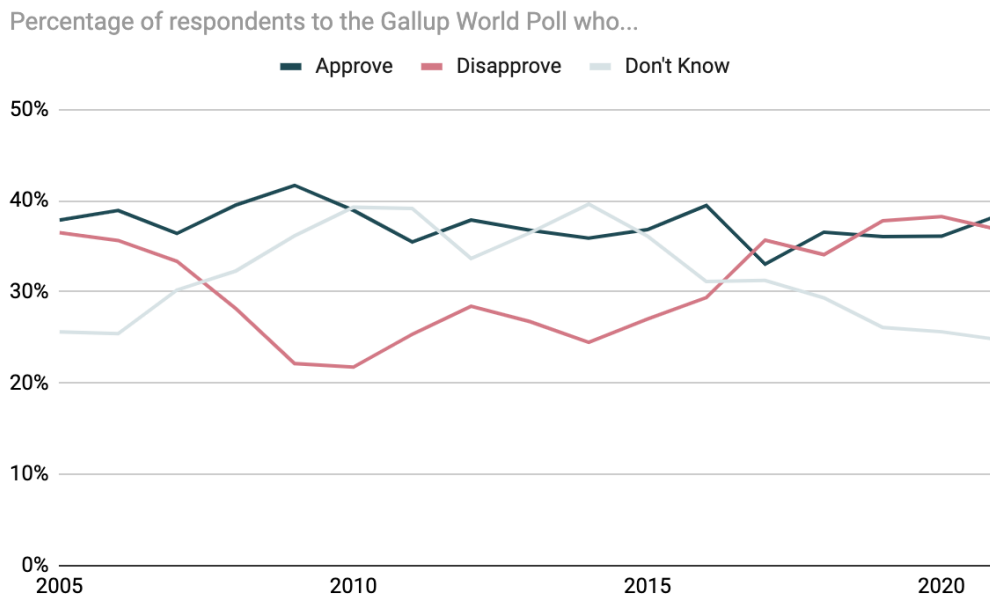
(ibid).⁷⁹ Foreign publics grew concerned that America's power could be used against them, and our allies grew disenchanted with a perceived lack of consultation in the aftermath of 9/11 (ibid).

In the contemporary period, we have more robust measures to monitor how foreign publics' perceptions of the U.S. vary over time in response to their country's bilateral relationships with America, as well as broader regional or international events. Between 2005 and 2021, the Gallup World Poll annually surveyed respondents from low- and middle-income countries across the globe, asking them whether they approved or disapproved of the leadership of various foreign powers, including the United States.. America retained a relatively steady base of support among a core group of between 30-40 percent of respondents who consistently approve of U.S. leadership (Horigoshi et al., 2022). But this is juxtaposed with higher levels of disapproval in the mid-2000s, after the Iraq War and Global War on Terror (as expected). Disapproval also surged again in the 2017-2021 period, mostly due to a decrease in those who characterized themselves as "undecided" toward American leadership.

Noticeably, this heightened disapproval is not limited to the U.S., as there are similar reactions along these lines with regard to the PRC as well. Horigoshi et al. (2022) argue that the timing of the onset of this late surge in disapproval may be a reaction to the intensified competition rhetoric between the U.S. and the PRC, in which countries of the Global South feel that they are being forced to pick sides. Perhaps lending further credence to this idea, they find an apparent splintering between member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (of which the U.S. is a vocal critic and is actively promoting alternatives) versus holdout countries that are generally closer aligned with the U.S. (ibid). This is a useful example to underscore a broader theme across this paper: we live in a world of increasingly porous boundaries, where decisions in one dimension of foreign policy can easily affect outcomes in another.

⁷⁹ Zaharna (2010) describes this as a "mirror phenomenon," whereby countries in which "America's favorability was low or had declined, public opinion of Americans towards those regions were similarly aligned."

Figure 10. Citizen Perceptions of U.S. Leadership in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, 2005-2021



Notes: This visual shows the percentage of respondents from low- and middle-income countries who said they approved (dark blue line), disapproved (red line), or did not know how they felt (light blue line) about the job performance of the leadership of the United States. All responses are weighted. Source: Gallup World Poll, 2005-2021. Graph has been adapted and replicated from Horigoshi et al., 2022.

5.3 Salience of Strategic Communications Content with Target Audiences

In the Cold War, there were several promising indications that U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy were reaching an appreciative audience within counterpart countries. Cultural and exchange programs deployed to promote postwar “re-education...recovery and integration” with Germany and Japan at the end of WWII were so popular that they prompted the emergence of “jointly funded bilateral exchanges” between the countries (Cull, 2022). The USIA’s Regional Production Centers and RFE/RL were known for putting in the spadework to monitor socio-political trends within target countries, conducting extensive audience analysis and monitoring shifts in public opinion to ensure their programming was hitting the mark (Cull, 2022; Pomar,

2021).⁸⁰ Former Communist bloc countries praised VOA and RFE/RL for maintaining their independence as trustworthy journalistic entities, even as they advanced U.S. foreign policy goals, such as curbing USSR influence and protecting democratic freedoms (Pomar, 2021).

This did not mean that the U.S. always got it right when crafting content for its target audiences. Cull (2022) provides examples of failures, such as a backlash against the Eisenhower administration's inclusion of material on Civil Rights during the Brussels expo and the Johnson administration's inclusion of staged combat footage in Vietnam documentaries being tone deaf to the likely reaction of foreign publics. Cultural diplomacy can cause unanticipated harm if the intended target audience takes offense, misunderstands the intention of the content, or the interaction reinforces preexisting negative stereotypes (ibid). More seriously, if target audiences feel their trust has been misplaced or violated, as was the case when cultural leaders in Africa's literary scene realized that they had unknowingly been supported by the CIA, this can create a substantial backlash (Cull, 2022).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Congressional and executive branch leaders recognized that the U.S. had to rebuild trust in and admiration for America in the eyes of the Arab and Muslim world. Despite following all the conventional wisdom of private sector advertising and marketing,⁸¹ the highest profile SC initiatives of the era only succeeded in generating "more distrust and further erod[ing] America's credibility" (Zaharna, 2010). In some instances, they failed to register with the target audiences despite ample resources and customization, with Al-Hurra Satellite News and Hi

⁸⁰ This included the production of "cutting edge" in-house research reports to capture important events in Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR; media monitoring activities by archivists who maintained comprehensive files on Soviet and European media coverage; the diligent collection of self-published and unsanctioned works (termed "samizdat") from the USSR which would later become a treasure trove of information to highlight the government's growing repression of its own people; as well as interviewing visiting travelers, business people, and immigrants from Soviet countries—all of which fed into the design of RFE/RL programming to increase its salience and relevance (ibid).

⁸¹ These initiatives did everything right on paper. They incorporated expertise from private sector advertising and marketing professionals. They were well-resourced with ample funding, political mandate, and qualified personnel. They leveraged new technologies for unprecedented reach and visibility with the intended target audiences. They followed professional communications best practices and produced well regarded quality outputs.

magazine as two poignant examples.⁸² An even worse outcome were well-intended efforts that actually fanned the flame of discontent, such the multi-media advertising campaign, Shared Values,⁸³ which target audiences decried as “happy Muslim ads” that were tone deaf to their concerns about U.S. policies (ibid).⁸⁴

The contemporary period saw a major breakthrough in the availability of quantifiable measures to assess the salience of U.S. strategic communications. The best example of this is the work of the USAGM to monitor who is consuming the content of its network of broadcasters, as well as whether target audiences view this information as credible and trustworthy. Using historical data on weekly audience metrics, we can see that two U.S. broadcasters have steadily grown their consumer base between FY2011 and FY2021 (the last year of available data), indicating increased demand for their coverage (Figure 11).

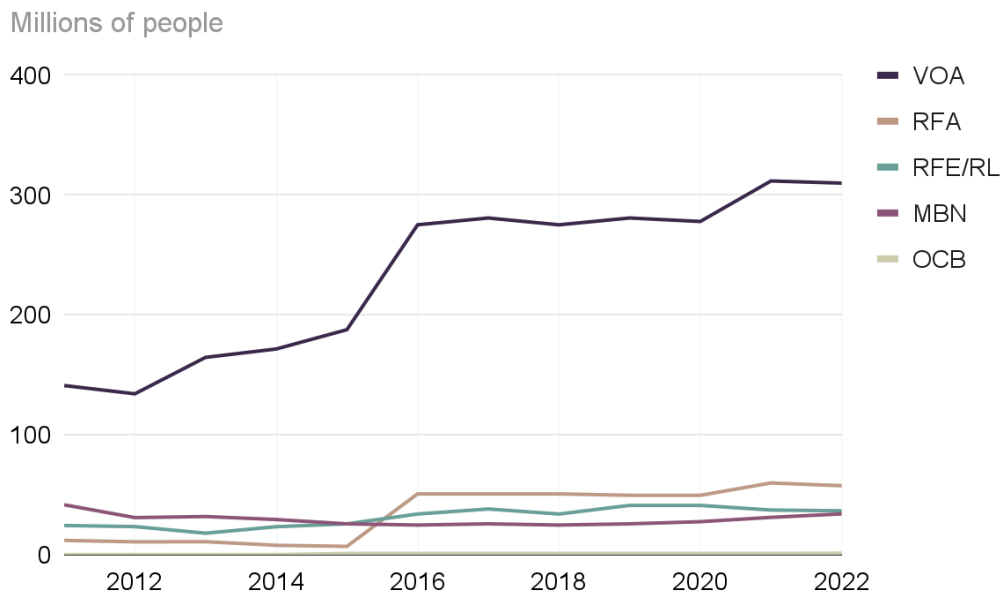
The global flagship Voice of America (VOA) has seen the largest expansion in their audience base by far, steadily growing over time from an initial baseline of 141 million to over 300 million by 2021. Radio Free Asia (RFA), also saw a substantial uptick in their audience base, particularly after 2015. It hovered initially around 10 million at the start of the period, but reached a healthy 60 million by 2021, performing the best out of the regionally focused grantee broadcasters. Comparatively, other surrogate networks held steady but did not radically change in audience size.

⁸² Al-Hurra satellite news network is probably the best example. Conceived as a 24-hour Arabic language broadcaster, the aim of Al-Hurra was to rival Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya by promoting coverage to counteract negative stories of America in the region. With a budget of US\$62 million per year of operation, the broadcaster “cost more than all of BBG’s projects combined,” but a Zogby poll found that it “barely registered as a primary source of news” with its target audiences (Zaharna, 2010). Hi magazine experienced a similar failure to animate Arab youth with its pages featuring American culture, music, and lifestyles, while eschewing politics (ibid). Bankrolled with a healthy US\$4 million launch budget, the State Department-generated content did not resonate and the project was canceled after only three years of operation (ibid).

⁸³ Costing an estimated US\$15 million, the Shared Values campaign emphasized common appreciation for “faith, family, and learning” between America and counterparts in the Arab and Muslim world (Zaharna, 2010). With all the hallmarks of a high-end product launch, the campaign featured print, digital, and TV advertisements featuring “Muslim Life in America” over a period of five weeks targeting four countries. Despite extensive market research and testing of the materials prior to roll-out, the ad blitz ended quickly and badly. Countries refused to carry the advertisements, while overseas Muslim audiences derided what became known as the “happy Muslim ads” that sought to sidestep the sources of discontent in their relationship with the U.S (ibid).

⁸⁴ This reaction was not limited to overt sales, but also more informational efforts. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the State Department released a factbook, “Network of Terrorism,” to educate foreign publics about the link between 9/11 and al Qaeda (Zaharna, 2010). Disconcertingly, polling actually found that Osama bin Laden had a higher favorability rating and Bush was seen as a greater threat to world order after the publication’s release than before (ibid).

Figure 11. Weekly Audience for U.S. International Broadcasters by Network, FY2011-2022



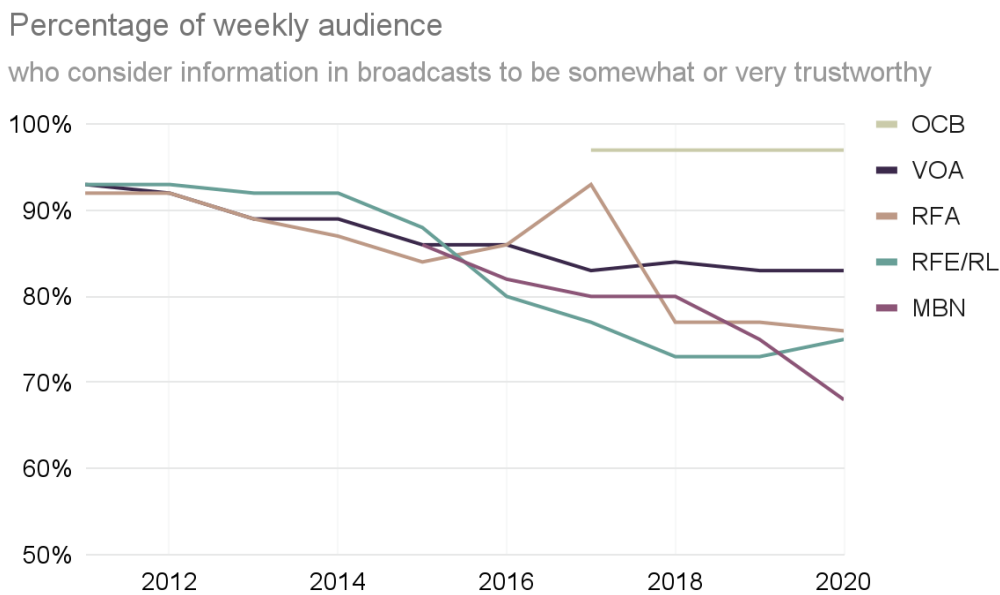
Notes: Since USAGM has not yet published their Performance and Accountability Report for 2022, FY2022 represents the targets for that fiscal year as reported in Congressional justification. Sources: BBG FY2015 Performance and Accountability Report, USAGM Fiscal Year 2020 and 2021 Performance and Accountability Reports, FY2020-2022 Congressional Budget Justifications. Compiled initially by Weed (2016, 2021) and supplemented by AidData staff. The last year of data (FY2022) is only a target, as the actual numbers have not yet been released.

Starting in 2013, the BBG/USAGM began employing a broader set of indicators to measure the effectiveness of its network of broadcasters, beyond weekly reach metrics alone (Osipova-Stocker, et al., 2022; USAGM, n.d.).⁸⁵ One of these is worth mentioning as a barometer of salience: the extent to which consumers of U.S. international broadcasting content viewed this information as credible. As shown in Figure 12, three-quarters or more of the surveyed consumers felt the coverage provided by each broadcaster was credible. But all broadcasters experienced a downward trend on this indicator particularly after 2015, with the exception of a brief boost for RFA from FY2015-17. The OCB’s performance may reflect the presence of a small, highly motivated constituency, consistent with discussions in earlier sections. VOA held relatively more steady than the remaining broadcasters.

⁸⁵ These measures became collectively known as the Impact Model, which the USAGM reports on to Congress via its Performance and Accountability Reports produced each year.

It is possible that this declining credibility could be a reaction to the USAGM’s content itself, particularly given concerns expressed of heightened political interference in recent years in broadcaster coverage. However, this could also reflect more general perceptions of U.S. foreign policies or relations with other countries affecting how consumers view the messenger. Noticeably, the timing of the downward trend in credibility of U.S. international broadcasting is consistent with the earlier finding we discussed, on increasing levels of disapproval of the U.S. from 2015 through 2021.

Figure 12. Perceived Credibility of U.S. International Broadcasters, FY2011-20



Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who consider the information in these broadcasts to be somewhat or very trustworthy. The methodology changed in FY2017, such that percentages from that point on are based on weighted averages. In prior years, this was based on simple averages. All responses are weighted from FY2017 onwards. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Reports for FY2015 and FY2020.

The highly targeted and customized nature of public diplomacy programs often makes it difficult to obtain easily comparable metrics for education and cultural exchange programs. Nevertheless, since exchange programs require the willingness of individuals from counterpart countries to desire to visit or study in the U.S. (or participate in relevant programming abroad), then the overall volume of participants in these programs over time is a proxy for demand. However, this may underestimate the salience of these efforts, given the finite supply of exchange opportunities the U.S. offers. Since the Cold War, the U.S. has sponsored “roughly 160,000 international

students to study in the U.S. via its Fulbright program and issued more than 250,000 non-immigrant visas annually to international students who self-finance their education or receive university-based scholarships” (Custer et al., 2019).

According to historical study abroad statistics from the International Institute for Education, the U.S. has consistently been one of the top study abroad destinations for students from around the world. Annual rates of international students and scholars studying in the United States steadily increased for most of the period between 1950 and 2019, with a tapering off in 2020-21, largely due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions (IIE, n.d.). That said, Israel and Batalova (2021) argue that there may have been a softening of interest in studying in the U.S. that predates COVID-19, as the rate of new international student enrollments began declining in 2016-17 and has continued since. In a 2018 survey of U.S. higher education institutions, top reasons given to explain the drop-off in new enrollments were a combination of: “visa difficulties, the political climate, competition from other [study abroad destinations] for students, and costs of attending U.S. colleges and institutions” (ibid).

5.4 Effectiveness of U.S. Strategic Communications to Advance America’s Interests

Broadcasters such as VOA, RFE, and RL have attracted high praise from leaders in the former Eastern bloc...who credit such programs for playing a pivotal role in “bringing a peaceful end to the Cold War and ushering in a new era of freedom” (Pomar, 2021).⁸⁶ Lennart Meri, foreign minister and later President of Estonia, went so far as to formally nominate RFE and RL for the Nobel Peace Prize, emphasizing that both had made a unique contribution to the “rebirth of democracy in the region” (ibid). General population surveys conducted by RFE/RL inside Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union indicated that these views were not limited to leaders, as there was widespread evidence of consumption of the radio stations’ content by the public and respondents underscored the importance of such broadcasts (ibid).

⁸⁶ For example, Pomar (2021) cites extensive quotes from public speeches and conversations from Poland (President Lech Walesa, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and the Polish Solidarity Movement leader Adam Michnik), Hungary (Prime Minister Jozsef Antall), Estonia (Foreign Minister and later President Lennart Meri), and the Czech Republic (President Vaclav Havel).

Beyond the former Communist bloc countries, other success stories included the efforts of the USIA to expose Soviet disinformation and convince Western European audiences of the USSR's duplicity; the Atoms for Peace campaign under Eisenhower, which "helped decouple nuclear technology from purely military applications"; and the efforts under President Ronald Reagan to "reduce European opposition to intermediate nuclear weapons to allow their deployment" (Cull, 2022).

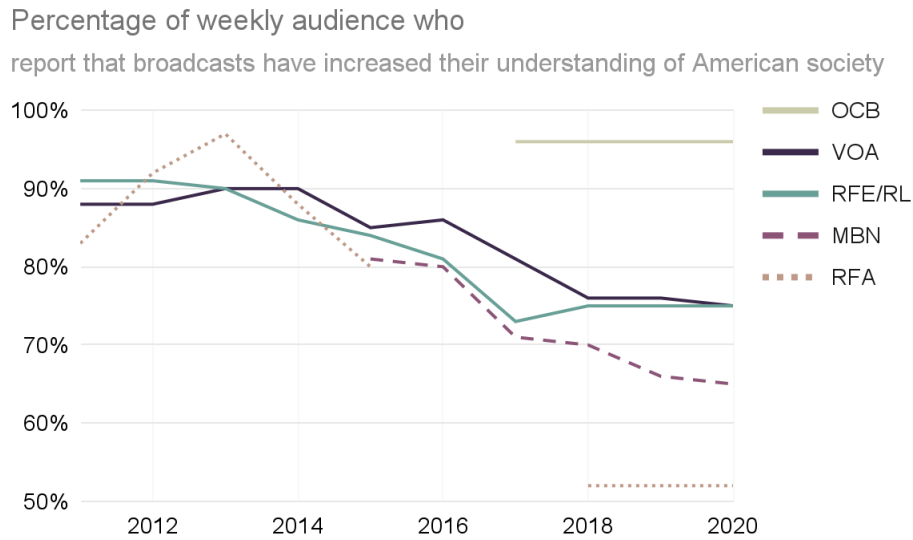
Of course, even when specific initiatives are popular with target audiences, they may still be ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviors about the U.S. This disconnect is perhaps most clearly seen during the 9/11 period with Radio Sawa—originally the inspiration of "Norman Pattiz, a member of the BBG and the chair of Westwood One, the largest radio network in America" (Zaharna, 2010). The radio station was launched in 2002 with a budget of US\$35 million and succeeded in attracting a large audience of Arab youth under 30, with a mix of Western and Arabic pop alongside newscasts (ibid). Yet, an evaluation conducted by the State Department's Inspector General found that Radio Sawa failed in meeting its envisioned outcome of spurring dialogue with Arab youth as a means of "promoting democracy and pro-American attitudes" (ibid). This underscores the importance of not assuming that the inputs or tools the U.S. controls and our potential power will always achieve the outcomes we want of realized influence.

To mitigate the risk of conflating popularity with effectiveness, the USAGM has developed some additional tracking indicators in the contemporary period that provide a modest window to assess the degree to which its international broadcasting activities may be moving the needle of public opinion and behavior in other countries. The first measure is the extent to which consumers of U.S. broadcasting feel that coverage has improved their understanding of American society. This is a stepping stone to behavior change as mutual understanding may enhance willingness to adopt shared view points and preferences. The second measure takes a further step along the continuum from inputs to outcomes by asking consumers if U.S. broadcasting coverage is influential in helping them form opinions on important topics.

For the majority of the period, over three-quarters of international broadcasting consumers surveyed felt that their understanding of the U.S. had improved (Figure 13), though all broadcasters experienced a decline, particularly after 2015. The most noticeable change in sentiment here occurred with MBN (-16 percentage points between 2015 and 2020) and RFA (-45 percentage points between its high point in

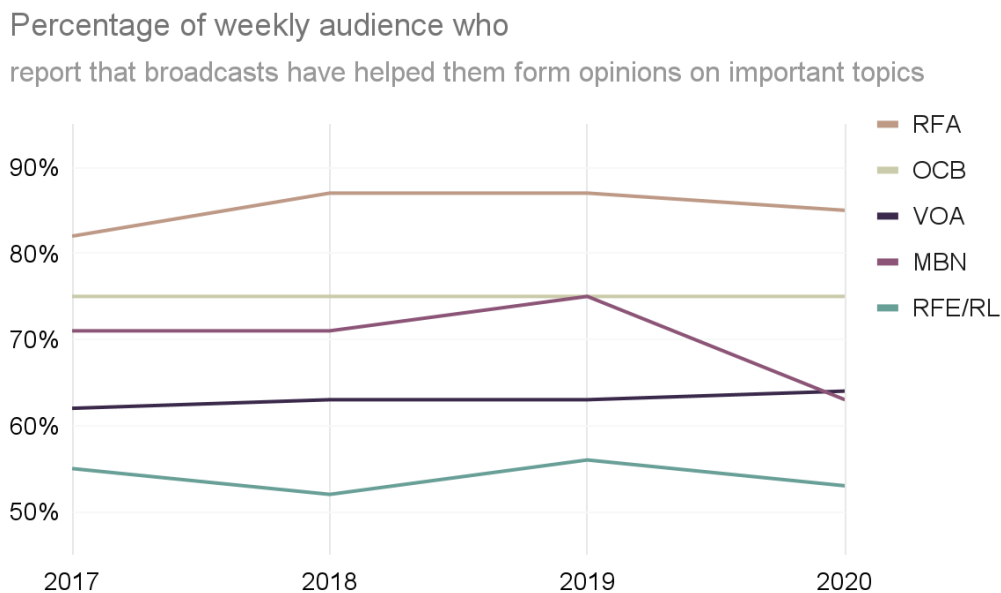
2013 and low points in the last three years). When it comes to influence, there is more continuity within an individual broadcaster's performance across multiple years, than across broadcasters.

Figure 13. Increased understanding of American society from U.S. international broadcasts, FY2011-20



Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who report that broadcasts have increased their understanding of American society. There was a methodology change beginning in FY2017 such that the percentages are based on weighted averages. In prior years, this was based on simple averages. All responses are weighted from FY2017 onwards. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Reports for FY2015 and FY2020.

Figure 14. Influence of U.S. international broadcasts in helping audiences form opinions on important topics, FY2011-20



Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who report that broadcasts have helped them form opinions on important topics. This indicator was new as of FY2017 and therefore there is no data available for previous years. All responses are weighted. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Report for FY2020.

Influence scores were generally lower than other measures, which makes sense in that this is actually the hardest metric to crack, as there are many factors that affect how consumers think about issues of importance to them. Only one broadcaster was routinely rated as influential by three-quarters of its consumers: RFA. Taken together with the understanding measure, this might indicate that RFA listeners feel that they are already familiar with the United States (hence why performance was lower on this score), but still turn to RFA broadcasting to make sense of current events and the world around them. Alternatively, this could speak to something about the nature of RFA’s coverage if it is less focused on socio-cultural stories from the U.S. and more speaks into dynamics on the ground or in the region.

OCB is fairly consistently high across the board on all measures, which again lends itself to the idea of a small, devoted constituency that feels intensely about the broadcaster’s importance. The remaining three broadcasters hovered between 50 and 75 percent throughout the period, with RFE/RL trailing on this measure, which is somewhat surprising to see given its perceived importance particularly during the Cold War

period. This could reflect a more contested marketplace of ideas which might be expected given increasing media freedom and coverage following the end of the Soviet Union.

Given the highly individualized nature of education and cultural exchange programs that cultivate deep ties with individuals, it is difficult to pinpoint quantifiable metrics of likely effectiveness. Nevertheless, there are a number of examples on a smaller scale that speak to potential for influence. According to statistics maintained by the Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau at DoS, 590 former and current heads of state have participated in its programming to date. Forty of those individuals were Fulbright program alumni. Training future or current leaders is a powerful way to influence the norms, attitudes, and policies of counterpart countries, even if this may take several decades to see manifest. But exchange programs can also be impactful in other ways outside of the political realm, for Weymouth and Macpherson (2011), found that U.S. trained economists participating in the Fulbright program between 1981 and 1997, for example, were able to catalyze free trade reform efforts in their countries.

5.5 Lessons for the Future of U.S. Strategic Communications

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to derive some important lessons and ideas from this historical look at strategic communications from the Cold War to the present day that should feed forward into additional papers and Gates Forum conferee deliberations regarding ways to strengthen U.S. capabilities in this area in an era of heightened great power competition.

Lesson 1: Empower and Reward USG Efforts to Be Responsive to Target Audiences

- **Idea #1.** Rather than using congressional appropriations to dictate inputs, provide flexible funding that ties resourcing to well-defined outcomes with room for agencies to craft strategies responsive to demand
- **Idea #2.** Maintain strong protections for independent coverage from U.S. broadcasters and reduce barriers to participate in study abroad and exchange which are critical to the salience of our SC efforts

- **Idea #3.** Decentralize more capacity, resources, and mandate for the design and delivery of SC from headquarters (DoS, USAGM) to the missions/grantees with adequate funding and access to future resources contingent on demonstrating local demand and alignment with U.S. goals
- **Idea #4.** Create the right incentives for DoS to fast-track the design and implementation of a headquarters counterpart to the Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative to ensure more seamless integration of FSOs and functional/regional bureaus with the new audience-focus of missions

Lesson 2: Remember That U.S. Strategic Communications Does Not Occur in a Vacuum

- **Idea #5.** In areas of common interest, burden share with like-minded partners to pool resources and capacity to deliver surrogate broadcasting in information-constrained countries and jointly fund exchange programs for priority target audiences
- **Idea #6.** The President should expedite nominating, and Congress confirming, a new Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
- **Idea #7.** Require the NSC to work with DoS and the USAGM to develop a U.S. strategic communications roadmap that articulates how broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts should be resourced, targeted, organized, coordinated, and measured to advance the October 2022 National Security Strategy, and report to Congress on progress tied to future appropriations

Theme 3: We Manage What We Measure, and We Measure That Which Others Care About

- **Idea #8.** Increase the budget for DoS and USAGM strategic communications activities, but mandate that three percent of these funds go to research, monitoring, and evaluation to support data-driven programming and performance reporting to Congress and the White House
- **Idea #9.** Institute an interagency coordination committee to facilitate strategic coordination efforts across agencies, in line with the proposed roadmap (idea #7), but

endow it with resources and mandate to reward reform stars, penalize reform laggards, and report regularly to the President and Congress on its results

- **Idea #10.** Form and fund a non-partisan, non-governmental organization (such as in the model of NDI and IRI) to engage the domestic public to raise awareness about international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts, crowd-in expertise, and create greater accountability for results, while providing safeguards against influence operations at home

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Background Research
Gates Forum I

Public Diplomacy and the Road to
Reputational Security: Analogue
Lessons from US History for a
Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper argues that public diplomacy is not an optional extra for foreign policy but a necessary component of sound national defense. It advances the notion of “reputational security” as a component of national security and looks to the history of public diplomacy for pointers on how this can be achieved. It cautions against quick judgements based on received wisdom but examines first the operational lessons emerging from the history of US public diplomacy and especially the work of the United States Information Agency (USIA). It looks at the range of public diplomacy activity, beginning with how USIA countered disinformation and the institutional arrangements supporting US public diplomacy. Emphasis is placed on the role of leadership, the interagency and coordination processes, and finally the domestic dimension (which includes a widespread mistrust of information work). The paper concludes that while the past does not provide a convenient ideal model of the kind encapsulated in the slogan “bring back USIA,” history does provide both guidance and warning. Above all, reputational security requires not only investing in public diplomacy to promote a better image, but also working to promote a better reality.

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Introduction: Reputational Security and the History of US Public Diplomacy

The English novelist L. P. Hartley famously began his novel *The Go Between* of 1953 by remarking: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” From the digitally saturated vantage point of 2022, the experiences of the analogue 20th century are increasingly foreign. They are subject to the generalizations, assumptions, and even romanticization akin to the kind of distortions applied across geographical distance. Just as the grass is greener on the other side of the geographical fence, so our temporal fences lend enchantment. Humans readily construct golden ages in collective memory. In the history of US security policy, the experience of public diplomacy is doubly foreign. It is the half-remembered adjunct to the main event, undermined by the absence of a dynamic successor bureaucracy. There is a vague sense in policy circles that at some key moments in the 20th century the United States appeared to be very successful in its global public engagement. Once there were crowd-pleasing jazz ambassadors, influential exchanges, knock-out exhibitions, Oscar-winning documentaries, and compelling rebuttals of disinformation. The world inside the Beltway may have forgotten the institutions of the two World Wars and immediate post-war but it still remembers the free-standing agency which oversaw this global communication from 1953, the United States Information Agency (USIA), and how it merged into the Department of State in 1999. It is easy to assume that correlation is causation and argue that if the USIA enjoyed success, its demise must be at the root of present shortcomings. By extension, some argue that USIA’s restoration must be the fastest route back to success (Khatiri, 2021; Cooper and Manning, 2021). This cannot be taken for granted. Policy choices today should draw on the entirety of the historical record and not just the highlights.

The observations in this essay draw on more than a quarter century of personal research in the archives of US public diplomacy: extensive contact with its veterans; immersion in the work of other scholars; and the process of refining that material into many publications (Cull, 2008; Cull, 2012 etc). I beg the reader’s pardon for the excessive citations to my own work, but each of these publications contain further argumentation and a jumping off point into archives and secondary sources to assist a sustained analysis. This essay is offered with the belief that the achievements of the USIA and the

other mechanisms of US public diplomacy deserve scrutiny and serve as a point of departure for further exploration.

I: Reputation is Part of Security

The first lesson to extract from the history of US public diplomacy (and the role of image in 20th century foreign policy more broadly) is that reputations are not just optional extras in diplomatic life but a vital part of statecraft. As the extension of democracy empowered publics and media platforms proliferated during the course of the 20th century, it became ever more important that nations were understood on the world stage. In extremity, places with positive meanings received external support while places lacking a reputation or with negative reputations experienced negative outcomes. Consider the divergent levels of support offered to the newer entity of Czechoslovakia, as compared to the more familiar state of Poland during the crisis of 1938-39. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, even made a point of saying that Britain knew nothing about the Czechs in his famous radio speech, opening the door to compromise at that country's expense. In the course of the 20th century, reputation became a key dimension of security and states prospered where they were able to develop their reputations through the tools of public diplomacy: both telling effective stories about themselves abroad and seeking to build admirable realities at home. The United States waged successive wars of ideas against the autocrats of the Great War, the fascist countries of mid-century, and the Communist world of the Cold War, in the ongoing effort to build and protect the US image and amidst the emergence of communication specialists within the diplomatic corps.

The communication element of foreign policy has been variously named within the US. In the Great War, it was often termed propaganda though its presiding agency at home, and abroad it was the Committee of Public Information. Information was the dominant phrase during World War II as well, with the Office of War Information and operation of United States Information Service posts in the field, although psychological warfare had currency internally and in activity aimed at enemies. The US government's communicators of the Cold War initially used information and exchange as their self-description but embraced the newly coined term public diplomacy as a neutral alternative to propaganda, which was reserved to refer to the activity of adversaries. Practitioners embraced it and gave it a more benign meaning in the breach than its

originator Edmund Gullion had intended. Since the Cold War, the dominant frame has been one of “soft power,” the term coined by Joseph Nye around 1990, which frames the benefit to be derived from public diplomacy in terms of an enhanced admiration for values and culture that can be harnessed for policy gain (Nye, 2004). Today that term seems too imprecise. It has been diluted by multiple interpretations, including those of Russia and China. Soft power implicitly frames the purposes of public diplomacy in terms of manipulation and getting what you want. The reality is that for most countries most of the time (and even for powerful places like the United States some of the time) public diplomacy is more defensive: working to be understood to avoid what you do not want. With this in mind, I have advanced the concept of “reputational security” as an alternative way of thinking about the role of images in international life (Cull, 2022).

The concept of reputational security underlines the role that image plays at the core of statecraft, invoking statecraft’s highest purpose: defense. Moreover, the concept also directs attention to the competitive nature of the international information space and reminds analysts that at any time adversaries are seeking to undermine the reputations of individuals, nations, and their alliances. Finally, reputational security is readily open to one of the great lessons of international image: that sometimes the problem is not your image or narrative but the reality behind it. The great strides to advance the reputational security of the United State have included changes to America’s reality made with international audiences in mind. For example, as Mary Dudziak has shown, worries over the international image of the United States were a key driver of both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations’ decisions to address issues of race and Civil Rights (Dudziak, 2000).

How then did the mechanisms of US public diplomacy contribute to the reputational security of the United States? During the 20th century, there were three distinct attempts to create a mechanism through which the United States could engage global opinion, each associated with a crisis. These were the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in the Great War; the Office of War Information (OWI) in World War II; and the initiatives of the early Cold War, overseen from the Department of State, which coalesced into the creation of the independent United States Information Agency (USIA). The existence of single agencies should not obscure the distinct nature of constituent tasks required to engage publics and thereby bolster reputational security. Historically, these have been listening, advocacy (including the countering of

disinformation), cultural outreach, exchanges, and international broadcasting. It is an open question as to whether a single agency is the best way to manage these elements.

II: It All Begins with Listening

Listening is the process by which an international actor engages a foreign public and integrates what it hears into its foreign policy formation. It is necessarily the foundation of effective public diplomacy, as for all communication. The function was part of the Office of War Information's wartime brief at home and abroad and became a particular strength of the USIA, with the reporting function built into its field posts. Some of this work falls under open-source intelligence. The USIA developed central expertise in the scientific measurement of public opinion. Its great in-house expert for thirty years was Leo Crespi, whose stature may be judged from the fact that he simultaneously served as president of the World Association of Public Opinion Research. Crespi's evidence of the comparative slippage in the prestige of the US was famously leaked on the eve of the Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate on foreign policy (Cull, 2014a). More than this, USIA officers in the field became individually attuned to the currents of opinion in their assigned countries and were able to finetune activities accordingly. The USIA's greatest public diplomacy successes usually reflected local knowledge. The agency's best-attended Expo pavilion (in Osaka in 1972) rested on the insight of the USIA's exhibit director, Jack Masey, that Japanese people would be excited both by a piece of moon rock and the locker and uniform owned by baseball legend Babe Ruth (Conway and Masey, 2008). At some points, agency research materials indicating negative opinions overseas elicited not just different communication but different policy. As already noted, the best example of this is the effect of the USIA's reporting and other feedback stressing the damage to the credibility of the US that flowed from racial segregation. For both Eisenhower and Kennedy this evidence was a spur to deploy federal force in support of change (Dudziak, 2000).

By the same token, failures to listen or failure to transmit listening were part of foreign policy failures. The history of the Vietnam War includes several examples. USIA director Carl T. Rowan neglected to pass on to President Johnson agency evidence that Vietnamese opinion would be unreceptive to increased American involvement. When Lyndon Johnson saw USIA poll evidence of the unpopularity of US foreign policy, he

saw it not as guidance but as a political liability and canceled the agency's global survey before it could become an issue in the 1964 election (Cull, 2008).

The ideal was probably the panel of regional experts convened by George H. W. Bush's White House during the first Iraq crisis and war who were able to shape a culturally sensitive and responsive foreign policy throughout. It is significant that participants had deep knowledge of the Middle East gained from decades of service on the ground and that President Bush and his team had an obvious respect for the extent and relevance of their knowledge (Cull, 2006).

III. Effective Advocacy Needs a Clear and Credible Story and Local Allies and Partners.

The second core element of public diplomacy is advocacy—the process of engaging a foreign audience around a particular foreign policy issue. Over the years, US public diplomacy has created a stream of publications, commissioned film and television, sent out speakers, and run libraries and other activities as part of its mandate to “tell America's story to the world.” The CPI had what amounted to its own telegraph agency: COMPUB. The OWI made excellent use of documentary film. Local relevance and partnerships emerge as a theme in many of the successes of US public diplomacy. The Marshall Plan did an amazing job of partnering locally to create bespoke materials which worked in the idiom of individual countries: in Ireland, this meant sentimental short films featuring veterans of the Abbey Theatre; in Sicily, this meant puppet shows for non-literate audiences; in the UK, it was witty animation (Ellwood, 2003). The USIA's apparatus included a number of Regional Production Centers at strategic locations like Vienna, Manila, and Mexico City to create media materials closer to their countries of use and in-step with local taste. One of its greatest successes in terms of viewers was a politically-themed television soap opera created for Mexico but seen across Latin America in the mid-1960s: *Nuestro Barrio* (Cull, 2008).

The content of US advocacy has varied, from specific items on a diplomatic agenda such as support for Woodrow Wilson's peace plans to broad presentation of American life and values as with Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Successes of the Eisenhower era included the Atoms for Peace campaign, which helped to decouple nuclear technology from purely military applications in the global imagination, and

People's Capitalism, which countered perceptions of the US economic system as simply exploitative by showing how it shared wealth with the many rather than the few. Similar achievements in the Reagan era included work to reduce European opposition to intermediate nuclear weapons enough to allow their deployment. Justifications of missile deployment were based on materials provided through the USIA but delivered by local voices. The campaign did not teach Europe to love nuclear weapons but cruise missiles could be deployed and hence brought to the negotiating table in Reagan's talks with Gorbachev (Eames, 2023; Cull 2008).

There were limits, of course. The USIA deployed immense resources in support of the US effort in Vietnam in the 1960s but was unable to convince most of the world that the war was necessary or winnable. Public diplomacy alone can not make a bad policy good. A second caveat, specific to strategies of partnership, is that covert support is unwise. The clearest historical example of this was the backlash against recipients of support during the so-called Cultural Cold War—not from the USIA but from the Central Intelligence Agency. Unknowing recipients of CIA largesse in the non-Communist African literary scene experienced news of their benefactor's true identity as a personal violation. In one extreme case—that of South African author Nat Nakasa—it may have triggered suicide (Brown, 2005). The openness of support provided by the National Endowment for Democracy since its creation in the 1980s has accomplished the same objectives of the old CIA program, without a track record of backlash (Cull, 2008; Cull, 2012).

IV. Countering Disinformation Needs a Multi-pronged Approach

One important subset of advocacy was its role in countering disinformation. This was always closely related to listening. The OWI monitored the rise and fall of Nazi-inspired and home-grown rumors at home and abroad, and came to an understanding that the best response was not to repeat and rebut the rumor but rather to actively sell a vision that undercut the assumption underpinning the rumor in the first place (Cull, 2015). For the USIA in the 1980s, rebutting Soviet disinformation was a major challenge.

Spreading disinformation had become a core activity of the Soviet KGB overseas, and the US faced the steady publication of inflammatory stories and supportive fake documents crafted to implicate the US in the latest assassination, coup, or disease

outbreak. Probably the most damaging Soviet disinformation campaign was one claiming that HIV/AIDS was an American bioweapon run amuck. The story filled a gap in knowledge of the era and played to a long-standing theme in Soviet propaganda, that the US had a track record of bacteriological warfare seen in the Korean War and dating back to the oft-repeated claim in Russian history texts that the US had used blankets laced with smallpox to facilitate the conquest of Native American tribes. The USIA's response to this and other Soviet misdirection worked at a number of levels. In the first instance, the agency's network tracked Soviet disinformation. It then published its findings for the benefit of other federal departments in a regular newsletter called Soviet Propaganda Alert, which circulated widely within the Beltway. Its rebuttals were carefully thought through. The agency's representative on the interagency working group on disinformation—Herbert Romerstein—understood that by revealing Soviet gambits to audiences other than those for whom they were created he could discredit the USSR. The strategy worked extremely well. Romerstein impressed audiences in western Europe with evidence of the laughably extreme claims made by Soviet media in the developing world (Cull, 2008).

But the history of the USIA's response to Soviet disinformation is more complex than simply communicating rebuttals and exposés more effectively. When the time was right, the USIA responded to Soviet disinformation with conventional diplomacy, negotiating what amounted to disarmament in the war of words as surely as the mainstream of US diplomacy addressed the world of conventional weapons. Highlights of information disarmament at the end of the Cold War included mutual textbook reviews, discussions about reigning in media stereotypes, and even an agreement to set up a hotline between embassies to correct misrepresentations swiftly. The most dramatic moment was probably the confrontation of the Soviet government at a health summit in April 1987, when the United States delegation threatened to suspend all cooperation with the USSR in HIV/AIDS research if the country continued to circulate claims that the virus was a US invention. Moscow's use of the claim diminished and—following a second confrontation during the Washington summit of December 1987—evaporated along with other disinformation claims for the remainder of the Soviet period. Mikhail Gorbachev himself pledged: “No more lying, no more disinformation... It's going to be a new day” and so it was for the remainder of his time in office (Cull, 2020).

V. US Culture Can Be Both a Solution and a Problem

While culture in general and the appeal of US popular culture in particular has long been part of the strength of the United States in global perception, it has a mixed history within US public diplomacy. Culture has been a secret weapon of US diplomacy, with audiences responding to initiatives as varied as jazz and ballet tours or the famous Family of Man photo exhibition co-organized by the USIA and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Yet culture has also been a weakness. US culture offends some audiences and requires contextualization to be explained as unrepresentative of real American life. The USIA had to work hard to show that American culture was not just 'fun' but could hit formal artistic marks as admirably as the formal cultural exports of the Soviet Union. It is significant that when the USIA considered which European journalists could benefit most from exposure to American thought networks through leader exchanges during the 1950s and 1960s, cultural correspondents and writers about dance and classical music were often favored. Embassies understood that such people could play an essential role in disrupting the unfair stereotype of the US as the land of cowboys and rock alone (Scott-Smith, 2008).

For most of its life, the USIA was not the sole diplomatic actor in the cultural field. At its birth Senator Fulbright hobbled the agency by insisting that the Department of State retain the reigns in both culture and exchange work. This meant that from 1953 until a reorganization in the Carter years the State Department oversaw cultural diplomacy through what became the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and subcontracted USIA officers in the field to deliver its program. This anomaly was eliminated in the Carter reform but remains an example of one of the most obvious ways in which the USIA represented the structure that was politically possible at the time and not an inspired and flawless ideal for the ages (Cull, 2016).

Cultural work was often the easiest to criticize, as President Truman discovered when an innovative modern art exhibition sponsored by the USIA's predecessor unit at the Department of State stoked the ire of the domestic media. There is a long history of congressional grandstanding to critique or even mock attempts to work through culture.

Examples include sustained attacks on expo pavilions by Representatives like John Tabor (D. NY), Wayne Hays (D. Ohio), and Neal Smith (D. Iowa) (Cull 2008). Smith effectively ended the run of world's fair pavilions sponsored by the USIA by insisting that the agency raise support from the private sector (Cull, 2012). At the end of the Cold War, it was the USIA's cultural work which lost its budget first. To budget-cutters like Senator Jesse Helms (R. North Carolina) it was an unnecessary extra. A pattern emerged of administrations realizing the value of culture only late in their term. President Clinton hosted his cultural diplomacy summit during the lame duck days following the 2000 election. President George W. Bush's energetic Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—Karen Hughes—also came late to the importance of cultural outreach. The power of culture has been neglected in US public diplomacy against other components. Simply "bringing back the USIA" would not ensure an effective use of cultural tools.

VI. Exchanges May Be Slow But Their Impact Lasts

Exchanges are consistently cited by practitioners as the crown jewels of US public diplomacy. They have a track-record of being well-resourced, with funding comparable only to that spent on the technology-intensive area of international broadcasting. As with culture, exchanges had an awkward place at the USIA during its first quarter century, thanks to Fulbright's skewing of the original design. The agency did, however, come to use exchanges effectively. The State Department's role in exchanges dated from the later 1930s and the range of 'good neighbor' initiatives deployed then to promote closer dealings with South America in the name of better hemisphere defense. Exchanges were favored as ideal postwar tools for reeducating Germany and Japan and for promoting the goals of European recovery and integration. The USIA developed a multi-tiered approach to exchange, with short-term International Visitor Leader Program exchanges emerging as a key tool for embassy teams and longer-term exchanges such as Fulbright working to build more substantial networks of mutual knowledge at arms-length, thanks to their board structures. Developments with exchange during the USIA's life included the emergence of bilateral exchanges jointly funded by wealthier partner countries like Germany and Japan and a shift to younger participants, based on an understanding of the value of connecting with individuals before their political attitudes have solidified. This trend towards younger participants continued in the post

9/11 period (Cull, 2019). Simply restoring the USIA would not ensure an effective exchange program.

VII. International Broadcasting is Powerful but Works Best at Arm's Length

International broadcasting was an ongoing headache for the USIA and another clear example that its setup was not optimal. Radio work had begun in the days following Pearl Harbor. The story told by Voice of America in the service of its modern mission tends to eliminate the contradictions. In this version, broadcasts began with a pledge to tell the truth and proceeded with an unbroken record of objective journalism. The archival record reveals a more complex picture. The war years included both truth-telling and more provocative propaganda broadcasts. The term "Voice of America" was not used consistently by broadcasters and the relationship between VOA and the formal mechanisms of foreign policy was rather fraught. Journalists indulged personal political bias (most notoriously in favor of the Soviet wartime ally) and allowed their critical views of certain diplomatic decisions to color broadcasts. The State Department took exception to on-air reference to the "moronic little king" of Italy. The war ended with VOA still as a definite work in progress. Despite wartime cleaning house, its mixed history left the station as an obvious target for Senator McCarthy. Commercial networks decided that VOA contracts were more trouble than they were worth. Eisenhower increased levels of policy oversight, including a relocation of VOA from New York to Washington, DC. The stabilization of VOA is one of the great achievements of Eisenhower-era public diplomacy. It helped that sections of the government seeking to play propaganda hardball had the CIA-sponsored stations—RFE and RL—in which to invest. By the end of the Eisenhower years, VOA had a clear sense of a news-focused mission and a presidential charter to deliver that.

It fell to the USIA to manage VOA from the agency's inception in 1953 to the reform of the broadcasting oversight mechanism in 1994. The agency was sometimes clumsy in its attempts to direct VOA. While tight control exercised during the Cuban Missile Crisis was understandable, administrations sometimes overreached. Tensions over reporting the end of the war in Vietnam and Watergate were sufficient to prompt bipartisan sponsorship of the VOA charter being written into law in 1976 (Cull, 2008;

Heil, 2003). The news mission of VOA was challenged in the early Reagan period, when incoming political appointees saw the broadcaster as a mechanism for a battle with the Soviet Union and failed to grasp the value of its reputation for objectivity (Cull, 2008). Similar struggles emerged in the wake of the Chinese government's repression of its citizens in 1989. The spat between VOA director Richard Carlson and USIA director Bruce Gelb weakened the image and reality of the agency at the crucial moment of post-Cold War transition (Cull, 2010).

The chain of reforms that led to the creation of the Broadcasting Board of Governors limited the role of the USIA in oversight of US broadcasting. The USIA director became simply an *ex officio* member of the board. This continued after the agency's merger into the State Department and down to the current Agency for Global Media, with the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs as *ex officio* board representative of the Secretary of State. While its institutional context was chaotic, VOA and the other stations showed themselves capable of making a difference to listeners around the world. Strategies that emerged during the 1990s included partnership with like-minded western stations, such as the initiative known as Broadcasting for Child Survival. VOA also showed itself able to maintain impartiality in reporting politically sensitive stories such as Bill Clinton's "Monicagate", an especially sensitive story for VOA as its then director—Evelyn Lieberman—had played a role in events under scrutiny in her former post as a White House aide (Cull, 2012).

VIII: Bureaucratic Context has Consequences

While work in each of these individual areas provided strength to the USIA, the agency was frequently limited by its political context within the bureaucracy and relationship to the wider world of US defense and foreign policy. The United States is unusual among democracies for perceiving public diplomacy as being a single task. Comparators such as modern Germany, Britain and France prefer to separate and firewall culture, broadcasting, and policy engagement each from the other. Totalitarian states think differently. The reflex of totalitarian states toward global "us versus them" thinking and centralized control structures has led to strongly integrated communication structures both in the past (Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq) and present (Russian Federation, Islamicist Iran, and China). The United States has also opted for variations of this same unified approach abroad, perhaps because its expenditure has been

conceived and justified to funders as a response to an adversary's campaign, rather than generally a good thing for a media age. In the era of the United States Information Agency, the US government also adopted unifying terminology to match: the single term "public diplomacy," as popularized by diplomat-turned-dean Edmund Gullion in 1965. The preference for the single umbrella term should not obscure the existence beneath that umbrella of five far older core practices: listening, advocacy, culture, exchange, and international broadcasting. These five elements work in different timescales, rest on different kinds of credibility and could be mutually damaging when mixed. The term public diplomacy was promoted by the USIA as part of its internal argument for sovereignty over all elements of engagement. For all its unified structure and terminology, the USIA prospered in part because its internal culture allowed these five approaches to flourish in their own way, and it fell short when it limited their development. The USIA and its organizing concept of public diplomacy was always a roof for a house divided (Cull, 2014b).

The USIA was also always a component of a larger US foreign policy machine which was itself in motion, as the country formed and reformed its approaches to the foreign policy challenges of the era. The agency existed as part of a process of adaptation to a world increasingly dominated by media and in response to a geopolitical challenge—the Cold War—in which media had particular significance, owing to its ideological nature and the stalemate on most conventional fronts that forced the conflict into psychological space. Key questions opened and re-opened during the period: what was the best kind of institution to oversee information work? How should it be led? How should it interface with other elements of US foreign and defense policy? How should it relate to the US public? This overall experience carries warnings for today's policy makers but also extends a promise of the times when the stars aligned and public diplomacy became a key asset of US foreign policy.

The USIA was created out of a patchwork of pre-existing federal communications activities. It drew on programs created during World War II such as Voice of America and the Office of War Information's embassy posts, known as the United States Information Service (a brand thought sufficiently valuable to be retained overseas after the creation of the USIA). It also absorbed the information elements of the allied occupation of Germany and Japan, such as the Amerika Hauser in Germany and its information work. Experiments with managing outreach in the early Cold War included

establishing an International Information Administration within the Department of State as a home for information, exchange, and broadcasting. The wish of the traditionally-minded Department of State and its especially traditional Secretary John Foster Dulles to be rid of this work was one of the dynamics at work in the agency's creation. Even had Dulles been a tech-loving risk-taker, he might still have felt awkward providing a home to the information program, given continual attacks from Senator McCarthy and others. Indeed, during the opening months of the Eisenhower administration when multiple inquiries were investigating options for restructuring US information, McCarthy's researchers Roy Cohn and G. David Schine launched a high-profile tour exposing alleged leftwing propaganda in the US library network overseas. The decision to establish the USIA as a free-standing agency was taken to head off criticism and rationalize existing operations. It rescued information work from an unsympathetic host but it also saved money. It was only in the area of publicity to Africa that the budget increased with the inception of the USIA (Cull 2008). The point is that it is not clear that just because the sub-agency structure was rejected in 1953 it is unworkable today. Communication is so central to all foreign policy that the idea of a foreign ministry without an in-house capacity of global advocacy and digital diplomacy is absurd. Similarly, the listening function belongs close to the heart of policy. Broadcasting has its independent existence now. It is harder to see how culture and exchange benefit from being sub-units of either the State Department or a notional revived USIA for that matter. The German model of separate academic and cultural agencies or the British approach with the British Council seems optimal. This argument was made by the Stanton Commission on US public diplomacy during the Ford period, only to be lost during the Carter years after lobbying from former USIA directors (Cull, 2016).

IX. Public Diplomacy Requires Investment in the Public Diplomat on the Ground

The enduring strength of US public diplomacy has always been its foreign service officers and their contribution to the country teams on which they served around the world. The USIA recruited from a range of fields, including journalism, public relations, academia, design and the arts, and officers used their eclectic backgrounds to the fullest. The integration of these officers took time and the evolution of a collective

ethos was also the task of many years. It was only in the later 1960s that USIA officers were permitted to serve as Foreign Service Officers rather than members of the Foreign Service Reserve. In the process, USIA officers evolved a distinct approach to their task. The term public diplomacy may have been coined as a euphemism for propaganda, but USIA officers gave it its own nuance with an emphasis on two way communication, mutual learning, and mutual benefit.

X. Leadership is Crucial for Success

To be truly effective an agency needs to be connected into policy. This was famously pointed out by Edward R. Murrow in the spring of 1961 when—frustrated by being shut out from policy discussion in advance of the Bay of Pigs invasion—he stated that if the USIA was expected to be “in on the crash landings” of policy it had to be “in on the take-offs” too. The agency had its greatest impact when its director was someone with a pre-existing relationship with the president. Murrow was able to establish a strong relationship with the Kennedy administration perhaps because his key deputies Tom Sorenson and Don Wilson were themselves so well connected with the inner circle. Sorenson’s brother was Kennedy’s lead speechwriter and special assistant Ted Sorenson (Tomlin, 2016). Other administrations had still more direct connections. Lyndon Johnson had a close relationship with his final USIA director, Leonard Marks, who had been lawyer to the family communication business back home in Texas. Ronald Reagan appointed his closest friend—Charles Z. Wick—to direct the USIA, and in more recent years the area of public diplomacy was taken more seriously when George W. Bush set his close associate Karen Hughes at the helm. In the Wick era especially, the connection to Reagan helped the USIA in the struggle for resources and encouraged less well-connected officials to rally to Wick’s initiatives. It was impressive how both officials and private citizens joined in the USIA international advisory council project to brief leading figures in global business of administration priorities under the pretext of consulting them. On the downside, at some points Wick’s friendship with the president set him up as a proxy avenue of criticism, especially from the political right. The friendship did not insulate USIA from congressional budget cuts at the end of the Reagan years (Cull, 2008).

Besides the value in having the right leader, US public diplomacy would benefit from having *any* leader. As researcher and former broadcasting governor Matthew

Armstrong has calculated, since the end of the USIA, the post of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy has been vacant for 40% of the time: hardly a foundation for successful work. Perhaps part of the USIA's secret was simply having someone in charge (Armstrong, 2021).

XI: Public Diplomacy Needs to be Connected to the Foreign Policy Process

When the USIA was created, it was fully connected to the wider foreign policy process. President Eisenhower invited the agency's director to sit in both his cabinet and the national security council. Unfortunately, these seats were by invitation and not required by law. Later presidents proved able to just as easily exclude the USIA from the inner circle of policy making. The Eisenhower years represent an especially interesting model. The president had realized the vital significance of the psychological dimension—he called it the P factor—during his time as commander of allied forces in Europe. He saw how skilled communication could shorten battles or even render them unnecessary (Cull, 2008). As Stephen Casey has documented, he also saw how poorly managed media behind the lines could create new hills to climb (Casey, 2017). His key lieutenant in many of the psychological battles was an executive from Life magazine—Charles Douglas Jackson (always known as “CD”)—and at the war's end Jackson remained both an associate of his and active in foreign policy establishment movements to rally resistance to Soviet advances. When Eisenhower became president, he called on Jackson to advise on restructuring of the information program and then to serve at his right hand in the White House as a Special Assistant for Psychological Warfare. Jackson's role meant that during the Eisenhower period there was an extra level of coordination of information work: a presidential adviser akin to the National Security Adviser who was in a position to steer both the overt work of the USIA and the covert psychological operations of the Central Intelligence Agency. He could also bring the president's clout to bear on policy matters with psychological or reputational implications which lay beyond USIA or CIA control. He or his successors in the role—William Jackson and Nelson Rockefeller— dealt with a variety of issues of this kind, including alliance relations, image implications of Civil Rights, and the space race (Osgood, 2006; Cull, 2008). In the atmosphere of the 1950s, with leadership from the top and a sense of collective struggle, it is amazing the extent to which the USIA was

able to draw citizen participation into public diplomacy. Famous peaks of State/private partnership included the many elements of US society which rallied to the people-to-people program launched by Eisenhower and the USIA in 1956 (Cull, 2006b). Largely unknown but significant activities included the USIA's role reviewing Hollywood screenplays to take out elements that might seem offensive to international audiences. The agency could draw on celebrity advisers such as filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille or pollster George Gallup. Their work was sufficiently valuable that they were promised places in the US government's deep nuclear shelter: tickets to survive nuclear Armageddon (Cull, 2008).

There are various counter examples of the USIA's exclusion from the foreign policy process. During the Kennedy years the agency was consulted, especially at moments of crisis such as the Cuban missile crisis or panics over Berlin, nuclear testing, and Vietnam; however, there are few examples of Murrow actually prompting a policy change for reasons of public diplomacy. He did manage to delay a resumption of US nuclear tests to emphasize Soviet violation of the moratorium. He was ill during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but his deputy—Donald Wilson—sat on the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), successfully pushed back against CIA requests, and persuaded the administration to release the U-2 reconnaissance photographs which showed the missile base under construction in Cuba. The images allowed the world to see the same provocation that Washington saw and move to its own conclusions. Johnson drew the USIA into the interagency process specific to Vietnam. Public diplomacy within that country was the responsibility of a USIA-led Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO). The overall information tsar in South Vietnam was the USIA's Barry Zorthian, one of the driving forces behind the VOA charter who was credible to the military side as a marine veteran from the Pacific War. The USIA was also a partner in publicity around the space program, the climax of which in the Apollo moon landings was one of the highpoints of US self-projection (Cull, 2008).

Coordination proved to be more of a problem in the 1970s. The USIA was disadvantaged by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's feeling that Nixon's choice as USIA director—Frank Shakespeare—was a loose cannon. Kissinger excluded the USIA from the inner sanctum of policy discussion and even created a special Siberia to hold the USIA at bay. He did, however, see the value of agency programming and was enthusiastic about exchanges. Later in the Nixon and Ford period, the USIA had a

valuable role turning Watergate into a kind of civics lesson and teachable moment. The agency was also a key partner in the planning and execution of international programming around the bicentennial. The bicentennial served as a welcome opportunity to reboot the US image after the difficulties of Watergate and the end in Vietnam, with a renewed focus on core ideas of democracy (Cull, 2008).

During the Carter period, the administration spoke of listening to the world and restoring the US image, but the agency had little direct contact with the president himself. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was an enthusiast for public diplomacy to the extent that it fitted his sense of a return to the Cold War. In contrast, the Reagan years were a golden age when, as in the Eisenhower period, the agency was integral to foreign policy and the director was a character on the diplomatic landscape. The agency's enhanced role was, however, tied to the personal standing of Charles Wick and did not survive his departure from the helm at the close of the Reagan presidency. Thereafter the agency was selectively integrated into the policy process during the George H. W. Bush and Clinton years, playing a significant role over Iraq and democracy promotion in Eastern Europe. Clinton's director of the USIA—Joe Duffey—was a subordinate figure in the policy process. His interface was through the Secretary of State's daily meetings, even though he was himself an agency director. There was irony in the agency's demise. President Clinton understood that maintaining the good image of the United States abroad required payment of UN dues and the signature of the treaty on chemical weapons. He did not see that his agreed quid pro quo—surrendering the independence of the agency responsible for the projection of the US image—might do even more damage to the US image by impairing the country's ability to communicate (Cull, 2012).

The period following 9/11 saw a mismatch between the needs for public diplomacy and the ability of the Department of State to respond. President Bush's first Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy—advertising executive Charlotte Beers—became rapidly frustrated with the channels available to her and looked to the US military to take on more of the burden of engaging foreign publics, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. The imbalance in institutional responsibilities took some years to correct. The reassertion of civilian leadership in the field of public diplomacy is one of the important legacies of the tenure of Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense (Armstrong, 2020).

XII. Expect Trouble at Home

Historically, one of the problems for US public diplomacy has been discomfort on the part of legislators and many citizens with the idea of media shaped for an external audience skewing domestic politics. Such concerns accelerated the demolition of the Committee on Public Information at the end of World War I and prompted mid-war reform of the Office of War Information during World War II. In the early years of the Cold War, US public diplomacy faced stiff opposition not merely from those who worried about political bias leaching into domestic discussion but also from US media outlets like the Associated Press, who considered that government channels would be unfair competition. Why would a small-town paper subscribe to the AP wire if it could get the news for free by tuning in to Voice of America? The US information program took shape with the expectation that it would be externally focused. A surge in partisanship during the 1960s established a precedent that USIA films could only be shown domestically with a special act of Congress. By the early 1970s, this had been codified into a tightening of the legislation authorizing all post-war US public diplomacy: the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948. The agency learned to live within the strictures of the tightened act and, as is the way of things, it became received wisdom that such was the American Way, rather like the posse comitatus restriction on domestic use of the US military.

The USIA had a second level of domestic difficulties linked to the first. Because of the restrictions on activity at home, the agency could do little to flag its achievements. Its materials were not open to scholarship in the same way as materials created by the Department of State and it lacked an obvious domestic constituency. Groups who cared about US public diplomacy—such as lobbies linked to diasporas within the US—were often a mixed blessing. The political strength of the Cuban American lobby in the electoral battleground state of Florida ensured that US broadcasting had to include an anti-Castro dimension, whether or not broadcasts created could actually be heard on the island. In other cases, lobbies which the USIA hoped might be supportive failed to deliver. The agency's final director, Joseph Duffey, hoped that university partners in exchange programs might rally against the planned merger of the agency in the late 1990s, in the same way that NGOs connected to international aid rallied in

defense of their federal partner, USAID. In the event, the USIA's private partners largely remained quiet, apparently accepting a level of interchangeability in their federal contacts and preferring to keep their powder dry (Cull, 2012).

This experience is instructive. One of the most obvious lessons of US public diplomacy in the 20th century is its inherently controversial nature. Each iteration of US global public engagement has drawn its share of partisan criticism. Congress and the US media have historically seen communication as a prerogative of the private sector and feared the potential for messages crafted for international audiences to spread into the domestic theater. In some eras worries were justified. Personnel in the Office of War Information really were too enthusiastic about the Soviet Union. In other eras domestic suspicions seem more of a reflex. George Creel who ran US propaganda at home and abroad during World War I was a veritable lightning rod for criticism, but it is hard to imagine anyone escaping the ire of the press when attempting to bring order to the chaos of communication in wartime (Hamilton, 2020).

It is the misfortune of international communication to be a field which appears readily understandable to the common citizen, and as such it has been a ready source for a certain kind of political playing to the gallery. In the era of the USIA, the Eisenhower administration was wrong-footed by the inclusion of material presenting Civil Rights problems at the Brussels expo, the Johnson administration was stung by including staged combat footage in documentaries about Vietnam, and the Reagan administration slipped when it attempted to manage domestic thinking about the crisis in Central America through an "Office of Public Diplomacy" at the State Department. The Clinton administration was burned by a plan to rationalize its international media work under Presidential Decision Document 68 (Cull, 2012). George W. Bush drew fire for setting up an Office of Strategic Influence at the Department of Defense. Sensitivity over information policy emerges as a constant. Administrations are attacked for not doing enough and then lambasted for seeking solutions that appear too Orwellian. The sensitivity was revisited in 2022 with the debacle over the Biden-era Department of Homeland Security's ill-starred Disinformation Governance Board. Administrations need to expect that initiatives in this area will be controversial and plan accordingly. To assume that initiatives in information will be treated as less controversial than regular policy is naïve to the point of negligence.

XIII. An Agenda for Reputational Security, Today and Tomorrow

What then can be understood from the history of US public diplomacy and applied in our own time? Each of the lessons identified above is instructive in its own way for the dilemmas facing the US today and emerging as we look to the future.

1) Reputation is Part of Security

The obvious lesson of the history of US public diplomacy is that it matters and has long been a necessary element in foreign policy success. We cannot understand the course or results of the World Wars or Cold War without considering the contribution of public diplomacy and other communication processes to the core tasks of winning friends and blunting the ideas of enemies. Importantly, the great crises of the past century were resolved not simply by the US convincing its allies of the virtues of cooperation, but by winning former adversaries over to shared objectives. The tasks of protecting the reputation of the US and advancing its core ideas are all the more important in an era like our own, in which the media have an unprecedented presence in public lives while at the same time—owing to the relative novelty of social channels—lacking the restraint that comes from the accumulated skepticism of long-term use. It is also clear that enhancing and protecting reputational security is not just about putting out the best image; it requires addressing those parts of our reality that undermine our position in the world.

2) It All Begins with Listening

Reputational security requires a clear understanding of how one is perceived in the world. The foundational step here is simply to care about the country's reputation and to do so in a systematic way. Americans are often surprised that some of the things they assume foreigners dislike in their country and dislike themselves—gun violence for example—are not drivers of international mistrust. Dysfunctional government and

intense political divisions are another matter and constitute a much greater danger to the reputational security of the country than stories invented by enemies.

Listening is a deliberate act. Much of the heavy lifting in this area is done by non-governmental sources such as the Pew Global Attitudes Survey or Anholt/Ipsos National Brands Index. But their work needs to be read and considered as a foundation for public diplomacy and matched by ongoing commentary from overseas posts. The USIA's strengths included its capacity for analysis. US public diplomacy today has a dedicated Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R/PPR, often referred to as "Ripper"). Any plan for reviving US public diplomacy should include investment in R/PPR. An enhanced public diplomacy requires a listening mind-set at higher levels of policy making and clear channels for transmission of what is heard in the field.

3) Advocacy Needs a Clear Story and Local Allies and Partners

Advocacy remains a key task of public diplomacy and is probably the element seen as most relevant by Congress. Effective advocacy has a role for centrally generated materials, and the history of US public diplomacy includes many examples of national ideas being channeled into materials for international audiences. The diversity of global audiences should, however, put a break on a complete embrace of a one-size-fits-all approach. US public diplomacy has often succeeded because of its ability to be locally flexible and work with credible partners country by country. The digital revolution has increased the relevance of partnership. Audiences around the world use peer-to-peer digital platforms to share information. This is a problem for public diplomacy, where communicators are necessarily unlike their audiences by reason of nationality. In digital public diplomacy, the key question is no longer "what can I say to persuade my audience" but "who can I empower who will be credible to my audience." The implication of this is to redouble the importance of field-level public diplomacy because of the process of local partnership. The creation of the Global Coalition to Defeat DAESH/ISIS in 2014 and the successful operation of its media hub in Abu Dhabi is an example of what can be done.

An important caveat to an emphasis on partnership is that support should be transparent. While covert sponsorship may be very tempting, experience suggests that there is no alternative to transparency.

4) Countering Disinformation Needs a Multi-pronged Approach

Of all advocacy tasks, counter disinformation needs particular attention. Counter disinformation responds to one of the highest profile assaults on US reputational security. The experience of US public diplomacy reveals that counter measures are possible, and that disinformation is not an all-powerful magic weapon. The history of the USIA shows especially the value of tracking disinformation and keeping audiences (within government especially) informed about the emerging lines of attack and the importance of cross-government cooperation. When it comes to presenting disinformation stories to the outside world, there is precedent for being wary of giving a malign story further currency—yet there is still greater value in reporting stories designed for one audience to discredit the adversary in front of another, or compiling multiple and contradictory stories from one source about a single issue and releasing those. This was the British government’s response to Russian disinformation around the chemical attack on Sergei Skripal in 2018. The experience of the USIA suggests that there is also value—when the time is right—in actually negotiating to reign in weaponized information as a route to mutually beneficial stability. Information disarmament may be a way forward in some areas. This might also include negotiating to ensure equal media access in those places, like contemporary China, which make use of easy access to the United States but do not reciprocate.

5) US Culture Can Be Both a Solution and a Problem

US culture remains a key asset for US public diplomacy but also opens vulnerabilities. It is to be expected that some audiences around the world will dislike US popular culture, and exposure to US high culture has long been a helpful balance. Unfortunately, culture has historically been an easy target for politicians seeking to score partisan points at the expense of a sitting administration. Both parties have done this, but the most recent example is Senator Rand Paul using the State Department’s sponsorship of a tour of three South Asian-American comedians to their ancestral homeland, “Make Chai Not War,” in 2012 as a way to embarrass Secretary of State Clinton in 2013 and

prospective Secretary of State John Kerry during confirmation hearings in 2014. Neither Clinton nor Kerry were able to robustly defend the work as relevant to maintaining the US image or as modeling community integration (the three comedians came from different Indian cultural and religious backgrounds). The positions of foreign policy leaders—whether for President Truman when attacked for the State Department’s “Advancing American Art” show or Clinton and Kerry in our own time—would have been stronger if the question of the legitimacy of cultural outreach had already been settled by the establishment of a congressionally-mandated cultural actor, akin to Germany’s Goethe Institute or Britain’s British Council. Such agencies are also easier for cultural figures to partner with as they work at arms-length from particular administrations. The artist is “playing for the country” rather than the administration.

6) Exchanges May Be Slow But Their Impact Lasts

Perhaps the strongest lesson to be gathered from practitioners of public diplomacy—after their passion for the field as a whole—is their regard for the particular power of exchanges. There is much evidence that exchanges bring sustained changes in attitudes but, unfortunately, they take a long term to pay off in full. It took a quarter century for the experience of Alexander Yakovlev at Columbia University to pay off in his promotion of the Soviet policy of Glasnost. One implication of this is that policy circles need to accept that public diplomacy and reputational security are part of a long game played across generations. The USIA understood this, crafting exchanges in the 1980s to successfully engage the so-called “successor generation” in Europe. Our adversaries speak in these terms today, investing in educational and language promotion across the long term.

Exchanges need to be responsive to policy in terms of their geography and—to some extent—focus. The Department of State should ensure that country specific exchanges are serving long-term policy priorities and are not stuck in a comfort zone servicing a particular academic discipline. Exchanges are not always successful. There will always be examples of persons whose home identity was strongly affirmed by their experience of the United States and who become enemies. The Egyptian nationalist Sayyid Qutb is the usual example of this, although Putin’s editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, is a potent example from our own time. There will always be outliers, but at minimum, exchanges need to be planned with attention to educational research in fields such as

culture shock. Evidence is clear that short, well-focused exchanges like those operated by the international visitor leader program work well and build positive feelings within the super-positive honeymoon period for the visitor. Longer-term Fulbright visits of a year outlast the disruption of culture shock and enable the visitor to develop a balanced response to the country. Medium-term exchanges of around three months length overlap exactly with the likely formation of negative feelings and may be counterproductive.

7) Broadcasting is Powerful but Works Best at Arms-length

International broadcasting by Voice of America and its sister stations has plainly been one of the crown jewels of US public diplomacy. History suggests that this has sometimes been despite the bureaucratic structures created to manage the activity. Policy discussion today might best consider how to support the existing mission of VOA and US international broadcasting more broadly: to uphold its mandate to present objective news at a time when media freedoms are under attack in so much of the world and when US media itself is undermined by partisanship. The history of the USIA's tenure in this role suggests that while international broadcasting requires management to maintain editorial standards, attempts at explicit editorial control are counterproductive. Some of the best work that parent agencies of US international broadcasting have done has been explaining to the rest of the United States why it is so important for VOA and its stable-mates to be objective. Even if Edward R. Murrow had his share of clashes with VOA leadership during his tenure as USIA director, he could be counted on to defend the charter to the rest of government, famously telling Congress in 1963: "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful" (Kendrick, 1969 p. 466).

8) Bureaucratic Context Has Consequences

US public diplomacy has tended towards being focused on a single structure: CPI, OWI, USIA. This means that the process of managing public diplomacy necessarily requires reconciling elements that work in very different ways across different timescales. Other democracies avoid this and prefer to develop agencies dedicated to specific tasks. If the creation of independent agencies is possible, it makes most sense to extend that status to the elements of public diplomacy that are limited or even undermined by their

connection to the ebb and flow of foreign policy—culture and exchange—and work to establish arm’s-length institutions of the kind that already serve western allies so well. At the same time, the administration should work to ensure the integrity of US international broadcasting and its own system of firewalls against the wrong kind of management, which has figured in a number of administrations but was certainly a problem during the Trump era.

Recent consolidation within the public diplomacy bureaucracy has deepened the need for careful oversight. The merger of the Bureau of International Information Programs and the Bureau of Public Affairs into a single Bureau of Global Public Affairs removes an old firewall and opens the possibility of short-term, politically-driven domestic priorities forcing out longer-term international items on the agenda, like a cuckoo chick forcing out nest mates and demanding ever more resource from their unwitting foster parent.

9) Public Diplomacy Requires Investment in the Public Diplomat on the Ground

The history of US public diplomacy demonstrates the value of maintaining a corps of experienced public diplomacy professionals with the ability to respond to public opinion as understood locally and to operate creatively. This required structures of personnel management and professional education; it also required adjustment to foreign service rules, formally extending the status of career Foreign Service Officer to public diplomats in the later 1960s. In the immediate aftermath of the merger of the USIA, the welfare of public diplomats suffered. The creativity which had flourished in the old agency withered in the risk-averse culture of the State Department. Public diplomats in the field became and remain subject to the area bureaus within the State Department and are adrift from the authority of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. And yet, moving the entire field of endeavor away from the State Department is not the move that is needed. It would make sense to begin by trying to get the existing mechanisms to work by nominating and appointing people to hold the key posts, valuing public diplomacy achievement, and providing a budget.

10) Leadership is a Crucial Factor in Success

The history of US public diplomacy suggests that the area is peculiarly sensitive to leadership—both good and bad—perhaps because the area of activity does not have an automatic profile within the Beltway of the kind enjoyed by other foreign policy agencies. US public diplomacy historically benefitted from leaders who were either public figures in their own right—like Edward R. Murrow—or who enjoyed a trusted relationship with the president, like Charles Z. Wick with Reagan or Karen Hughes with George W. Bush. Yet the problem during the 21st century is more often having any leadership at all. Public diplomacy advocate Matthew Armstrong has pointed out that the top position in US public diplomacy—that of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—has been vacant for 40% of the time (Armstrong, 2021).

11) Public Diplomacy Needs to Be Connected to the Foreign Policy Process

For public diplomacy to play a full role in enhancing a nation's reputational security, its concerns need to be part of the highest levels of policy making, both foreign and domestic. This was the case during the Eisenhower years. This suggests that the easiest way to increase the visibility of public diplomacy concerns at the policy-making level is to seek out a new C. D. Jackson to sit alongside the National Security Adviser. Such a figure would have a presidential mandate to convene the kind of conversations necessary to respond to and shape the current public opinion and reputation on the world stage.

12) Expect Trouble at Home

Finally, it is clear that public diplomacy and issues around reputational security are inherently controversial. Americans have a historical dislike of giving the sitting government an unfair advantage in domestic communication. It is the misfortune of international political communication to resemble an everyday activity. Everyone considers themselves competent to offer judgment and people in tangential fields believe themselves to be experts. The insights of professionals are too readily sidelined in favor of well-meaning intuition. More than this, public diplomacy necessarily touches

nerves at home. Domestic publics can be outraged that their country is not sufficiently admired overseas. Domestic media have a vested interest in pushing back against a government presence in communication. The history of the USIA and its predecessors shows that in times of partisanship the temptation to play to the political gallery over issues like cultural diplomacy or the representation of domestic problems is too great to resist. Policy makers looking to organize or reshape public diplomacy or to respond to issues of reputation should tread warily, with attention to partisan sensibilities and historic mistrust. The debacle around Homeland Security's Disinformation Governance Board is just the latest such misstep.

The answer is to look to develop bipartisan structures around public diplomacy and to work to build the kind of consensus that supports other aspects of US security.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that the world has changed from the immediate post-Cold War period. Analysts in those days became used to thinking of communication and cultural outreach as a kind of optional extra. The dominant understanding of Joseph Nye's helpful term "soft power" was that it was a bonus, once the aircraft carriers and economic levers of hard power were in place. Today we need a much more integrated approach. Adversaries large and small are seeking to increase their own standing and diminish the reputations of the United States and its allies and the values for which it stands. Reputation is now central to international struggle in the world and as such represents a vital dimension of security. That is why our adversaries devote so much time and energy to assailing it. An integrated concept of reputational security should require attention to all elements of public diplomacy, including investment in listening. It also gives a renewed logic to cultural and exchange elements: the human dimension that creates the personal experiences that disrupt the stereotypes peddled by others.

Once we think in terms of reputational security, we are obliged to reexamine not only appearance but reality. The path to truly securing the reputation of the United States requires not just better storytelling but living a better story. Foreign audiences know that America is deeply divided and that the political mechanisms which worked so well and attractively in the past are straining as never before. The remedy must include working together to improve the reality. The history of US public diplomacy supports

this approach. When the USIA told the White House of the extent of damage to America's standing that came from the Civil Rights Crisis, the White House responded. But it was changes to the reality of the racial situation in the 1960s that undercut Soviet propaganda on that theme, not simply glitzy communications about other things. Finally, an approach based on reputational security should include helping others to eliminate their vulnerabilities and improve their own ability to present their best face to the world. We need to think of the collective reputational security and mutual benefit derived from credible media and resilient and stable societies around the world. Sometimes investing in the reputational security of others requires constructive discussion of their weaknesses as part of the process of eliminating their vulnerabilities. We cannot restrict discussion of human rights abuses to criticism of our enemies (Cull, 2021).

In whichever way we understand the minutiae of the history of the USIA, public diplomacy plainly mattered in the past and matters now. In a world in which the nation's reputational security is threatened, the tools of public diplomacy are too important to be a mere political football. Inaction is inexcusable. The country would not accept the neglect of its tools of physical security and should not tolerate the neglect—by both sides of the political aisle—of the machinery and policies needed to ensure reputational security.

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Background Research Gates Forum I

Winning the Narrative: How China and Russia Wield Strategic Communications to Advance Their Goals

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1. Introduction

The world in 2022 is a time of contested narratives. Is the People's Republic of China (PRC) using economic power to coerce countries to do things that are not in their interest, or is it working towards their mutual benefit? Is Russia protecting communities' rights to self-determination or flouting the basic laws of international order? Is the United States promoting a "free, open, secure, and prosperous world" (NSS, 2022) or bullying countries into "surrendering their sovereignty" (Kremlin, 2022)? Chinese, Russian, and U.S. leaders each have their own preferred answers to these questions and jockey for position to ensure their story wins over the foreign leaders and publics they seek to influence.

The PRC has multiple objectives for its strategic communications. Beijing wants to win the world's admiration for its economic success following a "century of humiliation" (Tischler, 2020). To this end the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to take back control of the narrative from a hostile Western media, assuage fears about the implications of its growing power, and present an alternative narrative of its peaceful rise to which other countries can aspire. Beijing also recognizes that favorable public opinion and closer ties with other countries are a means to other economic, security, and geopolitical ends.

Economically, promoting positive narratives about China with foreign publics are essential to attracting new markets for Chinese goods, services, and technologies. The PRC needs raw materials and energy supplies to fuel its economy, transportation routes for Chinese exports, and opportunities to put excess industrial capacity and foreign exchange reserves to productive use abroad. If foreign citizens and governments admire the PRC for its economic success and believe that Beijing is a beneficial partner in their country's development, this generates demand to buy, trade, and work with the PRC.

Geopolitically, Beijing needs willing allies to support its positions in the United Nations, apply pressure on those that recognize Taiwan, and gain legitimacy for its development model and dealings with other countries. Beijing needs to win over foreign leaders and publics to adopt its viewpoints, project strength to check the influence of rivals, and inoculate itself against criticism from its detractors. This involves a dual strategy of "rebuking" Western conceptions of human rights and norms, and "selling" alternative

narratives and norms that are more conducive to advancing its interests (Repnikova, 2022). Moreover, Beijing aspires to displace status quo powers like the U.S. in a bid for global hegemony (Doshi, 2021) and the ability to inform, control, and co-opt narratives are critical to its success.

Beijing's leaders know that reputation is critical to the PRC's security interests. Offensively, it is easier for the PRC to justify its assertiveness in advancing its maritime and territorial claims if others either accept its actions as legitimate or lack the will to mount a compelling objection. Displacing the U.S. as the primary security provider in Asia, as well as accessing overseas ports and bases to project naval power requires bringing other countries along to feel that the PRC is a protector rather than a threat to their national interests. Defensively, Beijing knows that international criticism gives fuel to its domestic opposition and increases the likelihood of foreign intervention to aid them. If the PRC can cultivate support for its norms, values, and development model this neutralizes potential threats.

Russia wants to be seen by others as an undisputed leading world power and recover from the trauma of losing its empire, with the fall of the Soviet Union (Rumer, 2021). However, this manifests itself as less about image management than in animating a "revisionist foreign policy" (NSS, 2022). The Kremlin aims to expand Russian influence, undermine American influence, and pull countries away from Western institutions (Gates, 2021, p. 284). Yet, as with the PRC, the Kremlin's strategic communications must also support its broader economic, security, and geopolitical interests.

Economically, Russia has a smaller economy than that of the PRC or the U.S, but the Kremlin maintains a virtual monopoly on energy exports in Europe. This has provided Russia with substantial leverage to extract security concessions by threatening to cut off, divert or increase the costs of energy supplies. To sustain this advantage, the Kremlin has sought to undermine Western resolve by splintering consensus about the relative costs and benefits of international sanctions, as well as the impact on Russia's economy. Second, it has sought to reduce opposition to, and stoke public sympathy for, its signature energy projects such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which was vocally opposed by the U.S.

Geopolitically, Russia has a strong desire to wall off Eurasia as its own unrivaled sphere of influence, free from external intervention (Watts et al., 2020). The Kremlin has been

vocal in its desire to curb the eastward expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, instead proposing neighboring states to join an alternative Eurasian Union (ibid). Moscow also aims to achieve the acquiescence of rivals to its territorial claims. To achieve these objectives, the Kremlin needs to convince neighboring countries of the benefits of working with Moscow, the unreliability and dangers of Western partners, and the inevitability of Russia's continued dominance. It also acts as a spoiler: supporting disputed territories to push for greater autonomy from their own government, as well as promoting sympathetic fringe parties, individuals, or movements to gain popularity within their countries.

The Kremlin is also concerned with regime survival, and Putin sees Western democracy and liberalism as a threat to that interest. Mindful of the precedent of color revolutions in Eastern Europe, Putin wants to position itself as the rightful protector of conservative values and traditions to curb the spread of secularization and cultural liberalism that provide entry points for the West to foment unrest. The Kremlin seeks to mobilize Russian co-ethnics, Orthodox church members, and youth to embrace a common Eurasian identity with shared religion, ideology, and culture as an alternative to Western-style democracy. It sows doubt about democratic ideas and values, as well as exploiting social cleavages to heightened perceived disenfranchisement of Russian speaking or Orthodox minorities.

As U.S. leaders look to strengthen America's strategic communications capabilities to be fit-for-purpose in an era of heightened great power competition, it must take stock of which tools Beijing and Moscow use with whom, how, and with what results. In this background paper we take an in-depth look at the strategic communications toolkits of the PRC (Section 2) and Russia (Section 3), with an emphasis on international broadcasting and public diplomacy. In Section 4 we turn to assessing how well the PRC and Russia can translate their strategic communications inputs into their desired outcomes, as well as identify implications for the U.S. in terms of potential blind spots, comparative advantages, and entry points to exploit the weaknesses or vulnerabilities of its competitors in its bid to win the narrative.

2. China's Practice of Strategic Communications

In this section we provide an overview of the ways, means, and target audiences for the PRC's global strategic communications efforts—focusing on its international

broadcasting and public diplomacy overtures with foreign publics— and the extent to which this has varied over time and space.

2.1 Media Broadcasting and Cooperation

Beijing's most overt and direct form of strategic communications is disseminating its preferred narratives via state-owned media outlets. These print, radio, and television channels are primarily used for broadcasting to whole populations, though customized content and multilingual offerings allow for narrowcasting to more targeted subcommunities such as the Chinese diaspora. As Repnikova (2022) stresses, outreach to "Overseas Chinese" has long been a priority target audience of the PRC for many years, with an emphasis on cultivating sympathy for its policies and discouraging possible dissent. However, there are trade-offs for the PRC as leveraging its state-run media gives it more control the message—maintaining the integrity of the content and how it is distributed to target audiences—at the expense of perceived credibility, given skepticism about the ability for any Chinese media, state-run or otherwise, to maintain journalistic independence (Custer et al., 2019a).

The PRC has a large stable of state-run media outlets over which it can exert direct control to communicate the CCP's preferred narratives. Its print media holdings include: the People's Daily (Renmin Ribao), with web pages in English; China Daily, the official English language newspaper; Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao); which offers both English and Chinese language editions; and Reference News (Cankao Xiaoxi), published by Xinhua News Agency (Custer et al., 2019a). In addition, Beijing has extensive multimedia holdings: China Central Television (CCTV), its national broadcasting arm; China Global Television Network (CGTN), its international broadcasting arm with content in five languages; China National Radio (CNR); and China Radio International (CRI) with programs in over 60 languages (ibid). The Chinese government also controls the Xinhua News Agency and the China News Service, both state-run news agencies with web pages in English.

As Repnikova (2022) argues, Chinese media is heavily controlled and the CCP's governance of the media industry is highly institutionalized. In a major reform in March 2018, President Xi reorganized the PRC's state bureaucracy to merge three of its state-run media enterprises—China International Television, China Radio International, and China National Radio—under a newly formed "Voice of China," almost mimicking

the Voice of America (Custer et al., 2019a). The CCP's Propaganda Department took on oversight of Voice of China, along with China Daily, Xinhua, among other responsibilities (Xinhua, 2018) to consolidate party control over Chinese media (both state-owned and private) and engagement with foreign journalists (Bowie and Gitter, 2018; ChinaFile Conversation, 2018). The PRC has a far-reaching ability to not only directly control the content of its state-owned enterprises but exert "de facto influence over a second tier of media outlets" by virtue of government regulations, CCP oversight, and low levels of media freedom (Custer et al., 2019a).

Four of the PRC's state-run media organizations maintain a physical presence in other countries: Xinhua, People's Daily, China News Service, and CCTV/CGTN. The first three outlets operate branches in every continent which collect information on current events of interest in the county or region in which they are based to send back to headquarters for wider distribution. CCTV/CGTN operates production centers which receive inputs from reporters to create full programs or segments primarily for CGTN.

Xinhua has the largest global footprint of the four outlets in terms of on-the-ground presence with 177 branches across 142 countries and multiple branches concentrated in 16 priority countries.¹ Most countries either have a Xinhua branch within their borders or are adjacent to a country that does. In comparison, People's Daily operates fewer branches (40) in a lower number of countries (38), but even this outlet spans 6 continents. The United States is the one exception to the People's Daily normal rule of thumb of one branch per country. Examining the distribution of its branches, People's Daily has a revealed preference for setting up operations in countries that meet one or more of the following criteria: home to large Chinese diaspora communities, in close geographic proximity to China, or are economically or geopolitically important epicenters of power.

China News Service maintains branches in fifteen countries across six continents, primarily targeting G20 member countries (or other important regional powers). The few exceptions to this rule (Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines) are important to Beijing for other reasons: they are home to large Chinese diaspora communities.² CGTN has a somewhat different geographic footprint because its three local production centers

¹ The top 16 countries with the highest volume of Xinhua branches are: Russia (6), the U.S. (6), Australia (3), Brazil (3), Canada (3), India (3), Japan (3), Belgium (2), Italy (2), Nigeria (2), South Africa (2), Spain (2), Turkey (2), UAE (2), UK (2), and Vietnam (2).

² This includes: Australia (1), Belgium (1), Brazil (1), Canada (1), France (1), Germany (1), Indonesia (1), Japan (1), Malaysia (1), the Philippines (1), Russia (1), South Africa (1), Thailand (1), UK (1), U.S. (1).

serve as regional hubs to generate and distribute content. The Nairobi (Kenya) center prepares and packages content for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa. The centers in London (UK) and Washington D.C. (U.S.) do the same for Europe and the Americas, respectively. These production centers, working in concert with Beijing's strong foothold in Asia, gives the PRC the ability to produce high quality television programming that covers regionally relevant news across the globe.

Beyond maintaining a physical presence in a subset of countries, the PRC can directly project and distribute its state-run media narratives via several channels. It distributes physical copies of China Daily in 27 countries across 6 continents.³ Once again, the revealed preference here is to emphasize those countries that host large Chinese diaspora communities, are near China, or are major nodes of economic or political power. The paper is typically printed at one central location in each country, with exceptions of the UK, U.S., Brazil, and Canada which had multiple locations.⁴

PRC-run media outlets have online websites to target customized content (not just verbatim translations) in the official languages and other popular languages of its target countries. This provides Beijing with a powerful and relatively cost-efficient amplification vehicle to reach broader audiences. In parallel, they have used social media channels such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook in some markets, even as the use of these tools are often restricted to its own citizens. In a limited content analysis of PRC state media on Twitter in the East Asia and Pacific region, stories disproportionately focused on the signature policies of senior leaders, namely the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the Chinese military (Custer et al., 2019a).⁵ Just as the PRC has invested in the 'pipes' to distribute its content globally, it has also sought to develop more customized and targeted content that is fit-for-purpose for local audiences through what Repnikova (2022) describes as Beijing's localization strategy, which includes "hiring local journalists, primarily for reporting roles, while keeping editorial and managerial positions with Chinese staff."

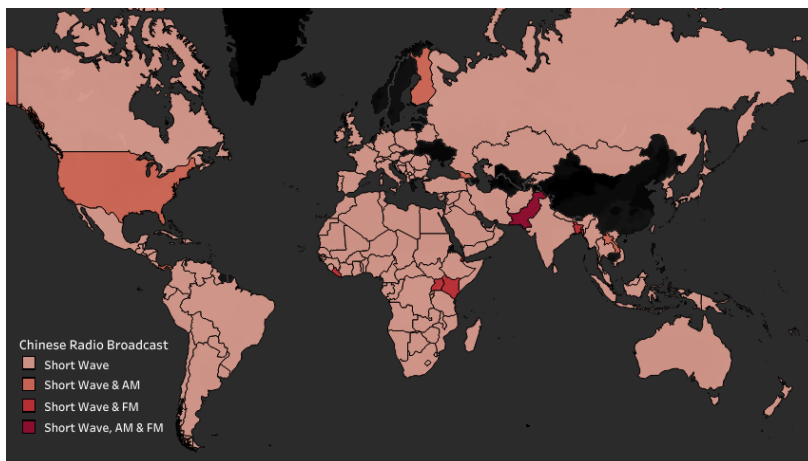
³ Lim and Bergin (2018) describe four- or eight-page inserts from China Daily called "China Watch" as an example of such circulation.

⁴ Although China Daily is printed in two Brazilian cities, we did not find any evidence of it in circulation in any Spanish speaking countries in South or North America. This was admittedly the opaquest of all the media types to track distribution. Presumably, if it is being printed in Spanish, China Daily is likely in circulation in additional countries beyond what we were able to capture.

⁵ Custer et al. (2019a) "categorized the Twitter feeds of six different Chinese state-run media outlets to identify the substantive focus of their communications across five thematic areas, including art and culture, sport, science and technology, Xi Jinping, BRI, and the military."

Similar to the U.S., the PRC has invested extensively in radio and television capabilities to transmit its broadcasts across the globe (Figure 1). Managed by China Radio International (CRI), its international terrestrial radio network leverages three types of broadcasts: FM (short distance), AM (moderate distance), and short wave (extremely long distance). It operates at least twenty-one FM and AM radio stations around the world⁶ with the highest concentration in the United States (five AM stations), Pakistan (one AM station and two FM stations), Kenya (two FM stations), and Uganda (two FM stations).⁷ CRI also has short wave radio transmitters in mainland China, Cuba, and Mali; however these broadcasts have the range to reach listeners anywhere in the world, only limited by language.⁸ There is a CCTV/CGTN channel available via satellite in every country on earth, producing programming in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Xinhua has a significant television presence outside of the Western hemisphere. CNC World English is a branch of Xinhua that broadcasts exclusively in English.

Figure 1. Global Reach of PRC Radio Broadcasting Facilities, Snapshot in 2022



⁶ FM stations can reach listeners in an area the size of a large city while AM stations can reach listeners at longer distances.

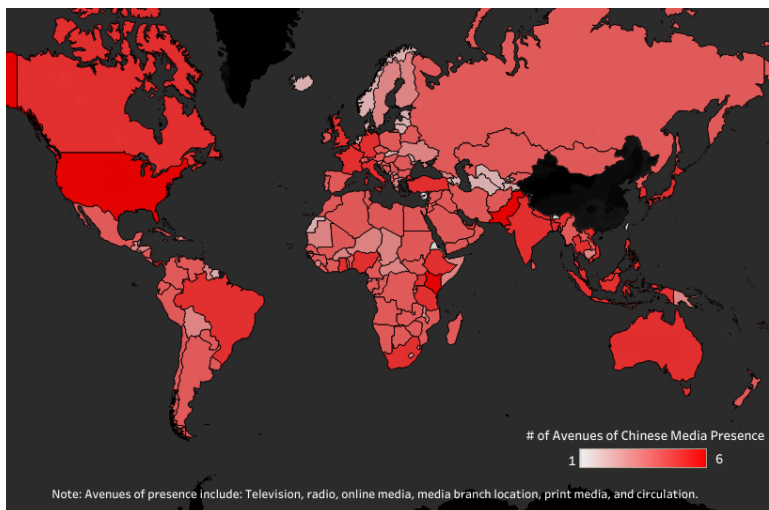
⁷ The total list of includes: Dhaka, Bangladesh (1 FM); Djibouti (1 FM); Tbilisi, Georgia (1 FM); Hong Kong (1 AM); Nairobi, Kenya (2 FM); Vientiane, Laos (1 FM); Monrovia, Liberia (1 FM); Macao (1 FM); Islamabad and Karachi, Pakistan (2 FM); Apia, Samoa (1 FM); Nuku'alofa, Tonga (1 FM); Kampala and Mombasa, Uganda (2 FM); Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, Riverside (CA), Washington, DC in the U.S. (5 AM); and Port Vila, Vanuatu (1 FM).

⁸ Short wave radio can be broadcast over large areas by reflecting the radio waves off of the atmosphere.

Note: This gradient map shows the reach of Beijing's shortwave, AM, FM capabilities by country, globally. Lighter colors indicate less intensity of coverage (fewer channels), darker colors indicate greater intensity of coverage (more channels). Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

PRC state-run media is a global enterprise: there is not a single country on earth that is not reached by one or more of its channels (Figure 2). In fact, foreign publics have multiple points of potential direct exposure to content from one or more of Beijing's stat-run media channels: local branches of Xinhua, People's Daily, China News Service, and CCTV/CGTN; access the PRC's radio broadcasts, satellite television channels, or physical copies of newspapers; and websites published in the official or popular languages of target countries. Of these points of potential exposure, television and radio broadcasting, along with websites with customized content for local populations are most prolific, followed by physical branches. Physical circulation of the PRC's print newspapers in foreign countries is far less common.

Figure 2. Concentration of PRC Media Presence by Number of Avenues per Country, 2022 Snapshot



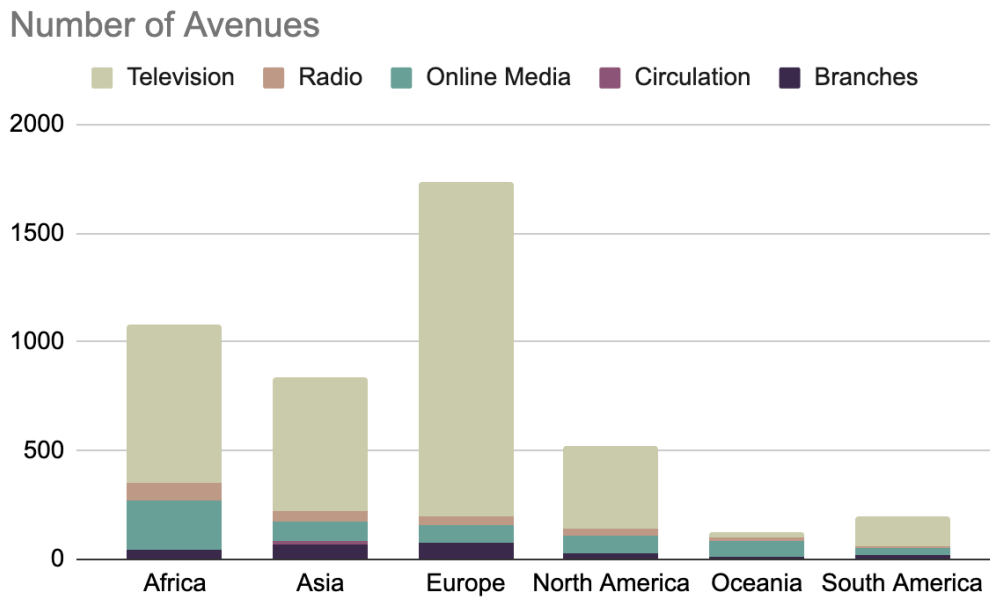
Note: This gradient map shows the concentration of PRC media presence by the number of avenues it has to expose foreign publics to its content. The avenues are television, radio, online media, physical branch location, and circulation. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

In comparing the PRC's media footprint to that of the U.S., there are several key take-aways that are immediately apparent in terms of reach and revealed priorities. Beijing orients the largest share of its state-run media attention towards Europe and a fair amount of resources towards Asia (Figure 3), consistent with Repnikova's (2022) argument that the PRC tends to emphasize its communications and diplomatic outreach

to major economies and its immediate neighbors. This profile is consistent with what Custer et al. (2022a) find as the revealed priorities of U.S. broadcasting in a companion paper. If we look at historical financing and congressional legislation, the U.S. has traditionally focused the lion’s share of its broadcasting emphasis across VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Asia to Europe and Asia.

Yet, there is also a stark difference. Compared to the PRC, the U.S. appears to have a relatively large blind spot: Africa. The African continent captures the second largest share of Chinese state-run media attention, but the U.S. has none of its grantee broadcasters specifically focused on this region, nor has it been a major focus of either its resources or Congressional legislation. Noticeably, this finding is consistent with Repnikova’s (2022) insight that the PRC has a concerted interest in building a strong positive image of itself in Africa, which it views as an important source of natural resources, and proactively countering arguments from the West which characterize its actions as neo-colonialist.

Figure 3. Regional Concentration of PRC Media Presence by Number of Avenues, Snapshot in 2022



Note: This graph shows the concentration of PRC state media activity by region, broken down by the avenues of its reach (television, radio, online media, circulation, physical branches). This considers the activities of the core six PRC state-run media outlets with an international presence: CCTV/CGTN, CRI, China Daily, China News Service, People’s Daily, and Xinhua. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

Beyond these institutional faces of PRC state media, Beijing also extensively makes use of its senior leaders and ambassadors to put a human face on its preferred narratives by giving interviews or placing guest op-eds with foreign media outlets. Ambassadors have been an important asset in the PRC's strategic communications arsenal, for they tend to be somewhat more recognized faces of the Chinese government within the countries where they are posted, as well as being more familiar with the target audience to better connect Beijing's messages with local realities. Beyond merely promoting positive stories about China, at times, PRC ambassadors have used this medium to rebut rival counternarratives from the U.S. and others. For example, the Chinese and American ambassadors to Nepal placed a series of heated op-eds debating the benefits and drawbacks of the Belt and Road Initiative versus the Indo-Pacific Strategy in the pages of Nepali news media (Custer et al., 2019b).

In the digital age, social media channels are tailor made for individual diplomats to quickly and widely transmit content via online networks, as well as engage in social listening to understand local sentiment towards current stories and events. There has been an uptick in the PRC's use of a variety of different social media channels in recent years (Schleibs, 2020; Repnikova, 2022), but that does not mean that it employs them in the same way. Facebook appears to be the place for Beijing to promote more "official, formulaic content," while PRC-affiliated accounts on Twitter tend to use a "more personalized and conversational style with foreign publics" (Custer et al., 2021a).

The PRC's messaging on these platforms throughout the COVID-19 pandemic show that accounts associated with individual diplomats or state-run media embraced several different tactics. Specifically, PRC affiliated accounts used posts to counter that Western criticism of Beijing were racist and biased, undercut the appeal of competitors by questioning their motives (i.e., they put profits over people) or the efficacy of their solutions (i.e., their technology does not work), while reinforcing its the PRC's reliability and generosity as a partner by featuring its medical teams and donations extensively.

Despite Beijing's supply-side enthusiasm for leveraging social media to reach foreign publics, the extent to which they can use these tools to effectively connect with foreign publics, versus speaking loudly to its rivals like the U.S. is an open question. In an analysis of 115 PRC-affiliated accounts focused on South and Central Asia, we found that its Twitter footprint is extremely limited in direct connections to active policy elites in 12 countries of interest (Custer et al., 2021a). Instead, Beijing is almost entirely reliant

on indirect connections via relatively few “brokers” with more expansive local networks (ibid).⁹ Therefore, any network power the PRC has to communicate with foreign publics on Twitter (at least in these countries) is tenuous, as it must piggyback on a few “individual politicians and journalists in South Asia” and “government agencies tasked with foreign affairs and trade in Central Asia” with larger local networks to promote its preferred narratives or counter those of others (ibid).

Given the skepticism about the independence of the PRC’s state-run media, and even its social media presence, Beijing has used another strategy to overcome this credibility hurdle: cultivating relationships with media outlets and journalists in other countries to serve as sympathetic interlocutors. Although this means that Beijing cedes some control over the message in partnering with local media, this strategy has several upsides for the PRC’s strategic communications. Domestic media outlets already have a “readymade base of readers, viewers, and listeners,” which provides Beijing with a “shortcut” to co-opt these existing networks which are deeper and wider than its own to tell its story (Custer et al., 2019a). Rather than the PRC having to put in the work to understand the frame of reference of a local population, partnering with domestic media outlets outsources the process of contextualization (ibid). Finally, domestic media outlets may have greater reputational currency with their local audiences as trustworthy sources of news and information that PRC state-run media outlets likely lack (ibid).

There are several different ways that Beijing “borrows the local credibility” of domestic media outlets in other countries (Custer et al., 2019a). The PRC’s most prolific strategy in this regard is the use of 429 content sharing partnerships (CSPs), agreements brokered between Chinese state-media and counterpart media outlets within target countries to reprint, share or co-create content. These CSPs involve media of all different types—print, radio, television, digital—and incorporate a wide range of 36 PRC media outlets at national and local levels.¹⁰

⁹ As Custer et al. (2021) explain, “each individual and organization on Twitter has a network of their own immediate connections: people they choose to follow and those who follow them. In turn, these connections have their own accounts that they follow and that follow them. These two tiers of relationships—one’s immediate connections and the connections of those you are connected to—are consequential because they influence the information you are likely to see and the conversations in which you are most likely to engage.”

¹⁰ At the national level, there are CSPs with actors such as CCTV/CGTN, China Daily, China Education Television, China News Service, China Radio International, Global Times, People’s Daily, South China Morning Post, Xinhua. There are also examples of CSPs that involve subnational level media outlets in China such as those from Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Jilin, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shanghai, Tianjin, Yunnan, Zhejiang, and Guangzhou.

However, not all these outlets are equally prominent—the top five (Xinhua, People’s Daily, CCTV, China News Service, China Daily) accounted for 86 percent of all known content sharing partnerships. Moreover, compared to its state-run media footprint, Beijing focuses more of its CSPs on print media, which accounted for half of these agreements, followed by online media (20 percent). State media networks in counterpart countries (including, but not limited to newspapers, radio, and television) also receive a high volume of agreements (11 percent).

Taking a global view, the geographic distribution of the PRC’s content-sharing partnerships appears to be heavily weighted towards high-volume trading partners, geostrategically important countries, or those with moderate to sizable Chinese diaspora communities. Asia has the lion’s share (45 percent) of all known content sharing partnerships with PRC state-run media outlets (194 agreements). The countries attracting the highest number of partnerships were Thailand (26), Indonesia (14), Japan (14), Cambodia (12), South Korea (12), the Philippines (11), and Malaysia (10). This emphasis on neighboring countries is consistent with Beijing’s state priority to strengthen ties with its so-called “greater periphery” (Li and Yuwen, 2016).

Europe, Africa, and North America held similar weight to each other in attracting roughly 15-16 percent of the PRC’s CSPs (66-70 agreements each). Italy, notably, the first G7 country to join the Belt and Road Initiative, accounted for the largest share of CSPs (10), Hungary, Ukraine, and Albania (all BRI member countries) had multiple agreements with PRC media outlets. France and Spain also attracted attention, despite not yet signing on to BRI. On an individual country basis, two countries in North America—the U.S. and Canada—have brokered the first and third highest numbers of CSPs with PRC state-media outlets, accounting for 36 and 26 agreements, respectively. In Africa, the PRC’s footprint of agreements is more distributed across the continent with South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria the top recipients of CSPs. South America and Oceania were once again relatively lower priority for the PRC on this measure.

What do these content sharing partnerships look like in practice? This can be as straightforward as local outlets subscribing to Xinhua’s free daily information sharing service, reproducing CCTV news reports as part of international news coverage, or using Chinese state-media broadcasting discs and equipment in their operations (Custer et al., 2019a). Producing local language content is an important focus of many CSP agreements to make PRC content more accessible to a wider audience. For

example, Xinhua's TV arm works with Thai News channel TNN24 to dub and broadcast PRC content from English into Thai via their distribution network and China Radio International has agreements with 23 countries to dub and distribute Chinese movies and TV dramas into foreign languages (CNC, 2013; Custer et al., 2019).

In addition to redistributing coverage from PRC media, local outlets also pursue co-creation of new content. For example, TVK in Cambodia and China Intercontinental Communication Center collaborated to create a documentary of Sino-Cambodian friendship (Custer et al., 2019a), while Chinese and Pakistani TV hosts join forces on a co-produced "CPEC Time" program on Pakistani television to discuss the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Ahmed, 2019). Through a partnership between China's Shandong Journalist Association and its counterpart in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley, journalists on both sides have jointly produced content such as documentary films on Uzbek handicrafts, Uzbek horses, and the Confucius Institutes (Custer et al., 2019b). CSPs can also involve more ambitious efforts to join forces on dissemination on at an institutional level rather than related to discrete pieces of content, such as the Yunnan Mobile Digital TV Company and the National Television Company of Kampuchea brokering a deal to pursue an 80-channel digital TV transmission network (Gai Shuqin, 2012).

In practice, CSPs can provide Beijing with a pass-through for PRC narratives to directly infuse domestic media coverage with minimal intermediation, while citizens who consume local news are oblivious to the fact that they are effectively consuming the CCP's propaganda. Redistribution of PRC state-run media content via domestic outlets seldom discloses that the material, in whole or in part, originally came from a Chinese state-owned enterprise. This is particularly concerning in countries with lower levels of capacity to produce high quality news that maintains journalistic integrity. During interviews with journalists conducted across 9 Asia-Pacific countries (Custer et al., 2018 and 2019b), it was not uncommon for interviewees to say how easy it was to copy content from Xinhua or other PRC news media (with the permission of their CSPs) and paste that into their own news stories to meet a deadline.

Although CSPs are the most readily quantifiable way of monitoring the PRC's ability to influence domestic media, Beijing also interacts with individual journalists and editors across the globe in ways that also can determine what is covered, how, and with what tone. One important way that Beijing does this is by offering to step in with professional

development opportunities for local journalists to either participate in training programs offered locally or visit China as part of journalist exchanges. For example, the China Radio and TV Company for International TechnoEconomic Cooperation offers technical training courses on radio and TV management with an emphasis on developing countries (CRTV, 2011). Such courses feature lectures on Chinese broadcasting, site visits to Chinese state media production facilities and manufacturing plants for radio and TV equipment (Custer et al., 2019). CRTV (2017) estimates that more than 1400 participants from over 100 countries have attended the courses as of 2017, going home to become the “backbones of their radio and TV institutions.”

Beijing has doubled down on brokering new content sharing partnerships with counterpart media outlets over the years. Although the first instances occurred in 2000, the year 2016 was an inflection point. Prior to this, the PRC signed nine agreements on average per year. However, perhaps sensing an opportunity as the U.S. and Western countries turned inward due to populist pressures at home in 2016, Beijing began to flood global newspapers with its content at an unprecedented rate, signing 72 new CSPs in a single year. This followed a directive from President Xi himself during a speech at the People’s Daily, where he “...emphasized that Chinese media ‘must love, serve and protect the CCP’” (CMP Staff, 2021).

Beijing’s journalist exchange programs are a powerful tool to build rapport and ingratiate itself with individual journalists in the hope that they view China more favorably and that, ultimately, this translates into more positive coverage when they return to their home countries. Journalists interviewed in the Asia-Pacific often viewed these interactions as making a positive impression on them, as their hosts “roll out the proverbial red carpet” (Custer et al., 2019b). Participants describe these press junkets as elaborate affairs which treat visitors to “multicourse meals, cultural exhibitions, and visits to model development projects or cities as part of a tightly controlled program of events (Custer et al., 2018). AidData tracked 539 separate instances where Beijing has hosted foreign journalists from the region in China between 2002 and 2017.

The PRC has also employed other means to influence the broader environment in which journalists operate in other countries, as well as foreign journalists working in China, using carrots to reward those who are deemed friendly to Beijing and sticks to punish or cajole its critics. Access to officials, credentials to cover important events or visas to visit China, for example, are important currencies for media outlets to produce compelling

news stories, which makes them powerful levers for Beijing to exert influence through opening or closing these opportunities for journalists. In turn, this creates levers of potential control for Beijing when it comes to approving or denying applications for new or renewal visas, requests for press credentials to cover events, and access to Chinese officials for interviews or comments.

The results can range in level of severity from missed opportunities to interference in operations and more serious acts of harassment or physical violence. On the less severe end of the spectrum, accredited journalists from Australia and Papua New Guinea were banned from covering events organized by the PRC alongside the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit (RSF, 2018), while Nepali editors reported receiving calls from the Chinese embassy to mute criticism of China in their coverage or lose advertising revenue (Custer et al., 2019b). The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) reports that Beijing routinely restricts or cuts short visas for journalists covering sensitive topics such as the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang province and a growing number of members have had difficulty renewing their visas (FCCC, 2018 and 2019).

For some journalists the consequences are far beyond the level of mere inconvenience and constitute more serious levels of outright interference or intimidation. According to the FCCC (2018, 2019), half of foreign correspondents surveyed in China in 2017 said they had directly experienced some form of "interference, harassment, and physical violence" in their reporting, with 55 percent in 2019 saying that the environment had even further deteriorated (ibid). Journalists working for American media outlets such as Voice of America are not immune from this harassment, as they were pressured to prematurely end a live interview with a Chinese dissident (Guo Wengui) and later fined (ibid). Even Chinese journalists are not immune from such heavy-handed treatment, as they may be harassed for failing to provide "proper coverage" (Hassid, 2008) or censored on social media (King et al., 2013).

The PRC has also begun to experiment with more expanded use of digital harassment as a strategic communications tool in recent years, not only focused on journalists but the broader public. The rise of artificial intelligence and other technologies has made it easier for states to engage in "computational propaganda" where they couple automation in the form of bots,¹¹ along with human curation, to flood the information

¹¹ Machine operated accounts to automatically generate and spam content out across a social media network.

environment with false or sensationalized information. As compared to the other overtures described in this section, human trolls and automated bots are more covert, in the sense that they often present a “false front” in not revealing the identity of the real individual(s) or organization behind the account and thus make it more difficult to clearly identify affiliations with a state actor.

However, these tools can, and often are, used in synergy with more overt communication channels. For example, official channels may intentionally pick up stories manufactured by trolls to boost their signal, while troll farms and bots may do the same to amplify official efforts via alternate channels. One of the rationales for this mixing of covert and overt tools is to manipulate how much importance individuals or groups attach to a specific event or news story relative to others (Kluver et al., 2020). State and non-state actors can artificially inflate the importance of a topic or view by flooding the physical and digital air waves with their preferred stories (Schleibs et al., 2020).

The net result of these tactics is to create a “firehose of falsehood” (Polyakova and Boyer, 2018), that allows the PRC to exploit a 24/7 news cycle and the scale of the Internet to continuously push out false or sensationalized information at a volume and velocity that is hard to control or counter. In this respect, this is very much tied into broader strategies such as “exploiting search engine results” and “trafficking in conspiracies” that Brandt describes the PRC using to inauthentically amplify messages in her companion paper to this one. The Hong Kong protests, and COVID-19 are two powerful examples of how this firehose of falsehood works in practice. Covert PRC-affiliated accounts on Facebook and Twitter were identified as promoting content “depicting Hong Kong protesters as violent and extreme” (Custer et al., 2019a), as well as responsible for 70 percent of U.S. social media fake news stories related to COVID (Tomlin, 2021).

2.2 Education and Cultural Cooperation

In addition to its overtures in the international media arena, the PRC also uses more personalized public diplomacy to build people-to-people ties between Chinese citizens and foreign publics in counterpart countries. With a nod to the playbooks of other foreign powers, the PRC has invested substantially in education and cultural exchange programs over the last two decades—opening language and cultural centers overseas,

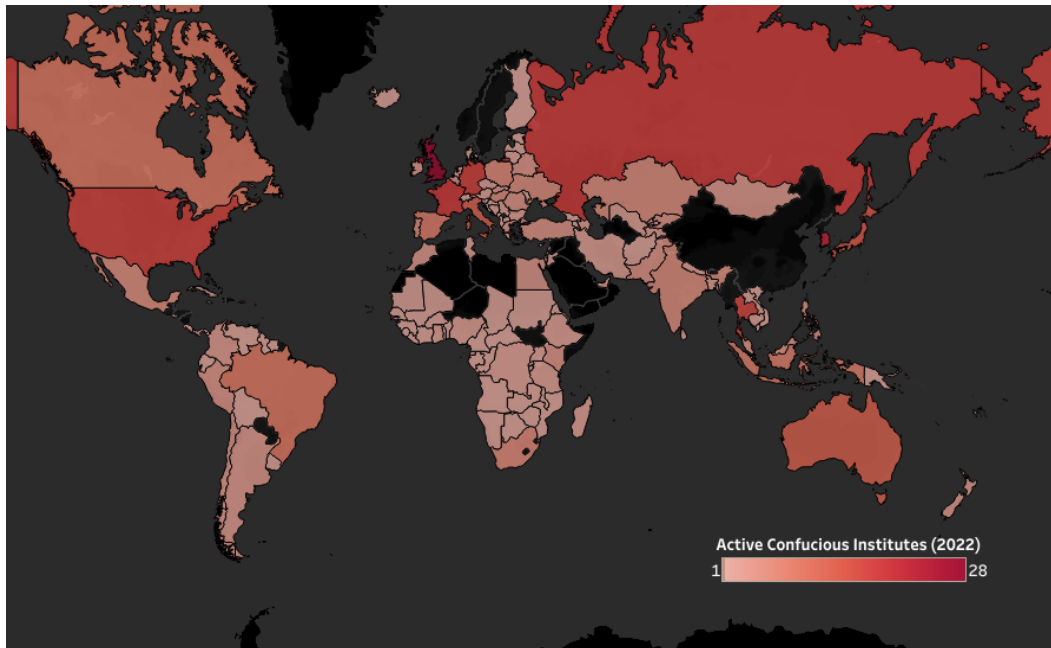
proffering generous scholarships and reducing other barriers to stoke demand to study in China, as well as providing vocational training and technical assistance.

The strategic rationale is twofold. In the short term, these pathways create relationships and goodwill that Beijing hopes will increase affinity towards Chinese culture, norms, and narratives. In the long term, as these social networks mature, past participants in education and cultural programs are more likely to source ideas, policies, goods, and services from Chinese counterparts. Taken together with the fact that the priority target audiences for such initiatives tend to be the sons and daughters of government, military, and industry, and cultural elites—this is a long-term investment in winning friends and allies within the next generation of leaders.

As Beijing's signature cultural diplomacy initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Confucius Institutes and Classrooms have a mandate to promote Chinese language and culture abroad. Confucius Institutes (CIs) are typically embedded within local universities in a counterpart country and promote cooperation with Chinese businesses. Confucius Classrooms (CC) are often established in secondary schools as either satellites to larger Confucius Institutes in the country, or as stand-alone institutions with a much smaller sphere of influence and fewer resources. These classrooms provide access to language classes, Chinese cultural materials, cultural events for the host school or the community, as well as facilitating participation in exchange and study abroad programs in China (Lien et al., 2012).

As of 2022, there are 448 Confucius Institutes in operation globally (Figure 4). The majority are in Europe (39 percent) and Asia (27 percent), consistent with the PRC's emphasis on these two regions in its media engagements described previously. The PRC's CIs are geographically dispersed, but ten countries account for more than one-third of its portfolio: the UK (28 CIs), South Korea (22), France (18), the Russian Federation (18), Germany (17), the U.S. (17), Thailand (16), Japan (14), Australia (12) and Italy (12). Yet, consistent with what we observed with its international broadcasting footprint, Africa is an up-and-coming region of interest to the PRC. The African continent is home to the third largest share of CIs, led by South Africa (6) and Kenya (4), but the numbers of CIs per country tend to be smaller.

Figure 4. Concentration of Active Confucius Institutes, by Country, Snapshot as of 2022



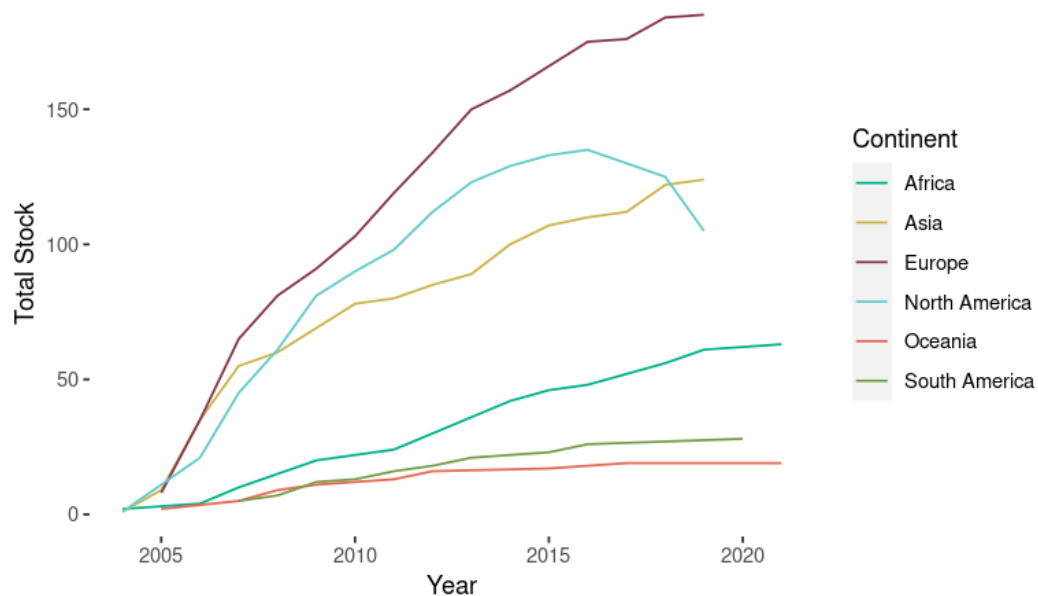
Note: This gradient map shows the concentration of active PRC Confucius Institutes (excludes Confucius Classrooms) as of the end of the 2021-2022 academic year subtracting out institutions that had previously closed. The lighter colors indicate fewer numbers of CIs in each country and the darker colors indicate a higher concentration in each country. Black indicates no CI presence. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

Beijing's CIs tend to be heavily concentrated in countries that are economically or politically powerful, with less emphasis on smaller, poorer, and closed societies. That said, the PRC does have at least one CI in almost every country in the world. At the subnational level, it places CIs in cities that are either economically or geopolitically important to Beijing (Custer et al., 2021a). At the primary and high-school level, CCs appear in all regions, but are predominantly located in the United States and Europe. In 2018, the last year of data available, more than 45 percent of all CCs globally were located within the United States, followed by the United Kingdom at 14 percent. Of the top seven countries hosting CCs, six of the countries have English as their primary language.

Taking the long view, Beijing is continuously adapting how it uses CIs and CCs within its larger strategic communications portfolio as it adjusts course to navigate headwinds in the form of increased resistance in target countries and criticism from competitors like the U.S. After the first center was established in 2004, PRC leaders initially doubled

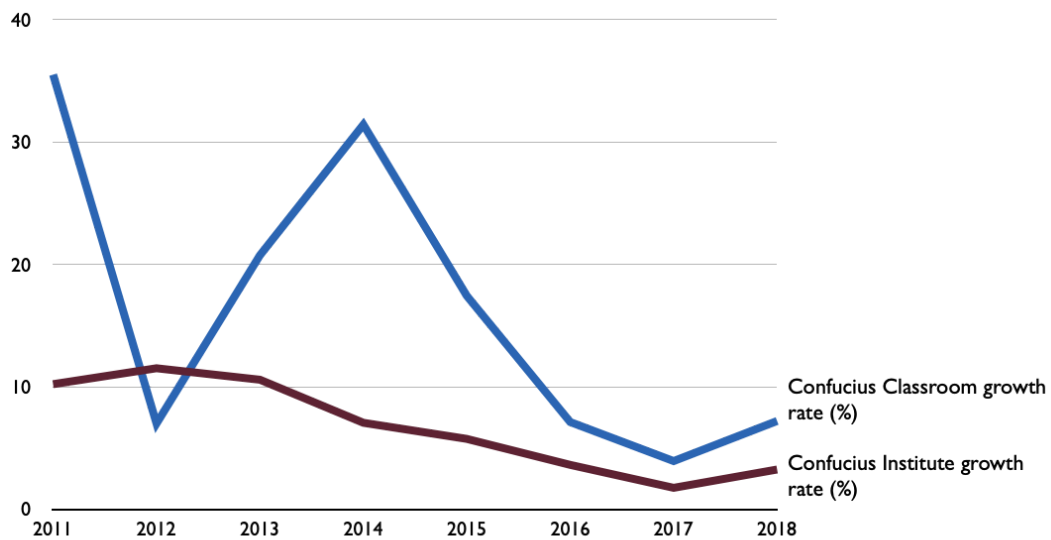
down on opening new CIs and CCs, with growth rates reaching a high of 8 percent and 23 percent per year, respectively, between 2013 and 2015. The single largest increase in new centers occurred in a single year: 2014 (+234 centers). However, after this early bonanza, Beijing dramatically pulled back on new centers. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was certainly a major disrupter, the PRC's subtle course correction began much earlier. By 2016 to 2018, the average growth rate for new centers declined to 3 percent for CIs and 6 percent for CCs.

Figure 5. Total Number of PRC Cultural Centers (Accounts for Closures) By Region, 2004-2022



Note: This graph shows the total number of CIs and CCs in each year by region beginning in 2004 and through the 2021-2022 academic year (no data for CCs after 2018). The yearly totals subtract out closures. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

Figure 6. Growth Rate of New CIs and CCs Opened, 2011 to 2018



Note: This graph shows the growth rate of new CIs (red line) and new CCs (blue line) between 2011 and 2018, years where the openings of the two types of institutions overlapped. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

The PRC's investments in Confucius centers are highly synergistic with another area of focus: educational exchange. Prior to the pandemic, Beijing prioritized positioning China to be a premier study abroad destination to compete with other popular locations such as the U.S., Europe, Japan, and Australia. The CIs and CCs serve multiple purposes in this regard: to expose foreign students to study abroad options in China, promote scholarship opportunities, and provide the language training that would make them competitive to win those scholarships. In this respect, the Confucius centers are invaluable to the PRC in identifying new study abroad candidates early on to be cultivated and later fed into China's higher education institution network. In addition to

language training and scholarships, the PRC also employed loosened visa restrictions¹² and English medium of instruction courses¹³ to further seal the deal.

Chinese state-backed exchange and scholarship programs are under the purview of the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE); however, there is an extensive network of actors involved. The China Scholarship Council (CSC), the MoE's non-profit arm, implements its international academic exchange programs (Custer et al., 2019a). Numerous central government agencies (Ministry of Commerce, Chinese Academy of Sciences, World Academy of Sciences), provincial governments, along with Chinese universities and private sector actors sponsor scholarships for international students (Latief and Lefen, 2018). Given the emphasis in the Belt and Road Initiative in facilitating multiple “connectivities” between countries (i.e., physical, digital, and social), the PRC launched a new Silk Road Scholarship fund to support student exchange between China and BRI countries, along with scholarships for Mandarin language learning for students from BRI countries (China MoE, 2016). Across these and other vehicles, the PRC has awarded over 350,000 scholarships to international students between 2010 and 2018, while 13 percent of international students in China were scholarship recipients (CAFSA, 2010).

In specific regional analyses conducted in the Asia-Pacific and Africa, we see that Beijing is highly strategic in how it employs government-backed scholarships, using access to these subsidized opportunities to stoke future demand in countries that have typically not sent large contingents of students to study China (Custer et al., 2021a; Dumont et al., 2021).¹⁴ Prior to the pandemic, the PRC had proven to be very adept in casting its study abroad opportunities and scholarships in a very generous light, with prospective candidates viewing Chinese scholarships as more generous than those in other countries (Custer et al., 2018). Yet, in a head-to-head analysis of government

¹² In a comparative analysis of visa requirements and fees imposed by several study abroad destination countries for international students from 13 countries in South and Central Asia, Custer et al. (2021a) found that the PRC offered the least burdensome requirements—in terms of cost, health requirements, and proof of payment—for students from most countries in the region. By contrast, the U.S. and the UK offered substantially more burdensome, time intensive, and costly requirements for prospective study abroad candidates to overcome.

¹³ According to an assessment by Custer et al. (2021a), the use of English as a medium of instruction in “two-thirds of the top 351 higher education institutions in China” is a powerful incentive for international students who have not learned Mandarin, do speak English, but want to study somewhere closer to home or cheaper than the alternatives.

¹⁴ For example, Custer et al. (2019a) found that “Beijing appears to disproportionately target scholarships to EAP countries that lag their peers in sending their students to study abroad in China. In other words, the number of students an EAP country sent to study in China was negatively correlated with the volume of Chinese government backed scholarships a country received. Dumont et al. (2021) found that scholarships were the PRC's preferred mode of technical assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa—a region which had not previously sent high numbers of students to study in China—each year from 2010-2015.

scholarships offered by popular study abroad destinations such as the U.S., UK, Japan, and Australia, we find that this is a well curated (and encouraged) narrative that is factually untrue. Custer et al. (2019a) found that “after adjusting for purchasing power parity, Chinese scholarships carried roughly two-thirds of the value of most scholarships offered by other developed nations in relative terms.”

The PRC’s embassies abroad “play a dual role” in educational exchange: attracting foreign students to study in China, while also “mobilizing Chinese students overseas to serve as people-to-people ambassadors” (Custer et al., 2019a). President Xi Jinping has tasked the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD) to work with the Ministry of Education and embassies abroad to impress upon Chinese overseas students their responsibility to help increase “patriotic energy” for the “China Dream” within their host countries (ibid).

This exhortation sparked pushback among foreign governments who have begun to more closely scrutinize Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), which support expatriate Chinese students abroad, organize cultural events, and often receive funding from the local embassy (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018, p. 10; Hamilton, 2018). Since most Chinese students studying abroad tend to do so in advanced economies and open democracies (e.g., the US, UK, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand), this has provoked concerns in line with research which points to the potential of authoritarian regimes to use the relative openness of democratic societies as a weapon against them through the practice of “sharp power” (Walker et al., 2020). Although the choices of students to study abroad is not likely one dictated by the PRC,¹⁵ President Xi’s own statements underscore that the CCP almost certainly sees its overseas students as an important face of strategic communications with their host country peers.

Beyond students, the PRC also set its sights on providing vocational training for both civil servants and professionals. These projects, which include local training programs within counterpart countries and bringing professionals to study in China, allow Beijing to simultaneously shape professional norms and build relationships with local communities. In past research, we have found extensive examples of the PRC offering training for local law enforcement, border patrols, and justice officials, among others

¹⁵ For example, the Economist (2016) offers one widely cited reason being the desire to bypass the competitive National University Entrance Examination (Gaokao) required to pursue higher education within China.

(Custer et al., 2019b and 2021a; Dumont et al., 2021) which gives Beijing a potent channel to influence leaders charged with discharging and protecting the rule of law in their countries.

Another potentially powerful vehicle to watch is the PRC's use of Luban Workshops. Backed by a consortium of 31 companies and 18 vocational colleges in China (TEDA, 2021), the Luban workshops pair Chinese institutions with counterparts in host countries (like the CI model) to "export high-quality vocational education overseas" (Custer et al., 2021a) to socialize demand for Chinese technology, standards, and training. Although there were only 18 Luban Workshops globally as of May 2021, President Xi has referenced these institutions in several speeches promising to open more in future (DevonshireEllis, 2021; Yau and van der Kley, 2021).

3. Russia's Practice of Strategic Communications

In the remainder of this section, we provide an overview of the ways, means, and target audiences for the Kremlin's global strategic communications efforts—focusing on its international broadcasting and public diplomacy overtures with foreign publics—and how this has varied over time and space.

3.1 Media Broadcasting and Cooperation

President Putin began cracking down on Russia's domestic traditional media decades ago. In his first year as president, he took control of two of the three major Russian independent television networks in 2000, knowing that they were important sources of news for citizens (Gates, 2021, p. 264). Putin also has a long record of harassing Russian journalists to suppress criticism of the government (Gates, 2021, p. 271). These actions have allowed the Kremlin to control domestic stories for decades.

Similar to the CCP, the Kremlin's extensive state-run media apparatus also focuses on disseminating its preferred narratives abroad and offers the most direct route for influence of foreign publics. The main conduits include two international news agencies (Sputnik and TASS), along with seven state-backed television networks (Channel One, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Russia Today, Russia 1, Russia 24, Russia K, RTR-Planeta). These can be further bifurcated into two groups. Most of the outlets appear to have a circumscribed geographic reach, primarily focusing their content on Russian-language speaking minorities within the states of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia. TASS, RT, and Sputnik, however, are explicitly global in their outlook and distribution networks, like the profile of the PRC's Xinhua, CCTV/CGTN, and CRI, for example.

Among the globally focused outlets, TASS is one of Russia's oldest continuously operating media institutions and serves as the state news wire service. The outlet's 2000 employees staff domestic operations, as well as operate 63 news bureaus in 60 countries (TASS, n.d.), including the "largest network of foreign correspondents among [all] Russian media" (COP22, 2016).¹⁶ TASS boasts that it produces 100 news products, including 70 news feeds and its digital holding tarr.ru,¹⁷ with content in five languages:

¹⁶ In fact, TASS says that its correspondents are the only Russian media representatives in 16 countries.

¹⁷ TASS (n.d.) reports that tarr.ru is one of the largest online media outlets in Russia, exceeding 267 million users with approximately 34 million unique visitors per month. However, it should be noted that there are concerns that Russia state media routinely inflates its audience numbers.

Russian, English, Spanish, French, Chinese (TASS, n.d.; COP22, 2016). To further expand its influence, TASS reports that it has held 1500 press events attended by domestic and foreign elites, as well as brokered partnerships with 370 media sources from 134 countries (TASS, n.d.b).

Russia Today, commonly known by its acronym RT, was founded in 2005 and is now Russia's most visible international news outlet. A television network focusing on international news for a global audience (Russia Today. (n.d.)), it positions itself as a competitor to other state-backed international news outlets, including the British Broadcasting Corporation, France 24, Deutsche Welle, and Al Jazeera. Although it was initially launched as an English-language TV station (BBC, 2022), it also produces programming in Arabic, Spanish, and French.

RT appears to have the most extensive distribution network of the main Russian state media channels: 22 satellites and over 230 operators push out its signal (Russia Today. (n.d.)). The network boasts that over 700 million people in over 100 countries watch its programming (ibid); however, the statistics can be misleading as RT is suspected of vastly exaggerating its audience to project strength vis-a-vis international competitors (GEC, 2022). It also advertises the fact that RT has established partnerships with over 8000 hotels,¹⁸ making the channel "available in more than 2.7 million hotel rooms throughout the world—more than any other channel." Apart from Facebook and Twitter, the Kremlin also uses VKontakte, a popular social media app in Russia and Eastern Europe, to promote its messages.

RT's subsidiary, Ruptly, focuses exclusively on producing viral multi-media content largely aimed for social media consumption. Ruptly, in turn, wholly owns Redfish, a Berlin-based media company with a reported 1.4 million social media followers (GEC, 2022; Gilbert, 2022). Redfish is worth mentioning as an example of an emergent form of state-directed propaganda: designed to be ideological but produced in a way to convince the public of its believability and forget the associations with the Kremlin. As a case in point, Redfish gained notoriety for posting a map of airstrikes around the world mere hours after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

¹⁸ As of 2010, this included top international channels with linkages to the West such as "Hilton, Ritz-Carlton, Marriott International, Hyatt, Radisson Hotels & Resorts, Kempinski, Renaissance Hotels, Taj Resorts and Palaces, Holiday Inn, Four Seasons Hotels, Starwood Hotels, Best Western, and Sofitel." This picture may have changed substantially since the outbreak of most recent hostilities in Ukraine, as many countries have enacted bans and sanctions on the distribution of Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik.

In hindsight, it was a blatant effort to deflect criticism away from the Kremlin's actions, yet it was so subtly done that thousands of people shared and re-shared the visual, taking up the call to "condemn war everywhere," without realizing that it was produced by Russian state media (Gilbert, 2022). This is striking especially because social networks like Twitter often proactively disclose, and label media outlets affiliated with state actors (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Redfish Viral Social Media Map of Global Air Strikes to Deflect Criticism of the Kremlin, 2022



Sputnik is the newest of the trio of globally focused outlets, functioning as both an international wire service and radio network—the foreign face of the Russian media group Rossiya Segodnya. Following a major reorganization of Russian state media orchestrated by Putin in late 2013, Sputnik was launched in November 2014 with a stated mission to cover international political and economic news for a global audience (GEC, 2022; Sputnik International, 2021). Sputnik broadcasts its programming via

terrestrial radio as well as its website, using 25 multimedia centers¹⁹ around the world to produce and distribute content in 30 languages²⁰ (Sputnik International, 2021; GEC, 2022).

Among the outlets focused on Russian compatriots, Channel One television is the post-Cold War successor to the Soviet-era Programme One station, which broadcasts Russian language programming targeting Russian speakers living in or near the former USSR (Channel One Russia, n.d.). Rossiyskaya Gazeta is a Russian-language newspaper founded in 1990, focusing on socio-political and business news (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, n.d.). The Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), established the same year, oversees numerous media outlets in Russia, several of which reach publics outside of Russia in the states of the former USSR and into Eastern Europe (VGTRK, n.d.). These stations include RTR-Planeta (international service), Russia 1 (entertainment), Russia 24 (news), and Russia K (culture), which primarily serve either the domestic Russian market or Russian-speaking communities abroad. Founded in 1997 by the city of Moscow's government, TV Centre provides Russian-language coverage of news and human-interest topics for domestic and international audiences (TV Centre, n.d.).

These primarily Russian-language outlets have a more limited geographic focus on the states of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia compared to RT and Sputnik. Yet, the sheer number of these Kremlin-affiliated channels and their ubiquity is potentially powerful in dominating the information space in the relatively small media markets of these countries. Television, radio, and news agencies appear to be the Kremlin's preferred modalities for reaching consumers across the 17 Eastern Europe and Eurasian countries, while print has a narrower footprint (Dumont et al., 2022). Kyrgyzstan (11 outlets), Armenia (10 outlets), Georgia (9 outlets), Kazakhstan (8 outlets), and Belarus (7 outlets) attracted the most attention (ibid). This stable of Russian-language offerings is strategically important to the Kremlin given its express interest in mobilizing Russian ethnic and linguistic minorities.

¹⁹ As of 2014, Sputnik had multimedia centers in London, Washington, D.C., New Delhi, Cairo, Montevideo, Beijing, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, Paris, Buenos Aires, Belgrade, Helsinki, Minsk, Kiev, Tashkent, Astana, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Sukhumi, Tskhinvali, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Baku and Chisinau. It further says that each center is staffed by 30-100 local professionals. As Repnikova (2022) notes, with the outbreak of hostilities, some of these centers were shut down.

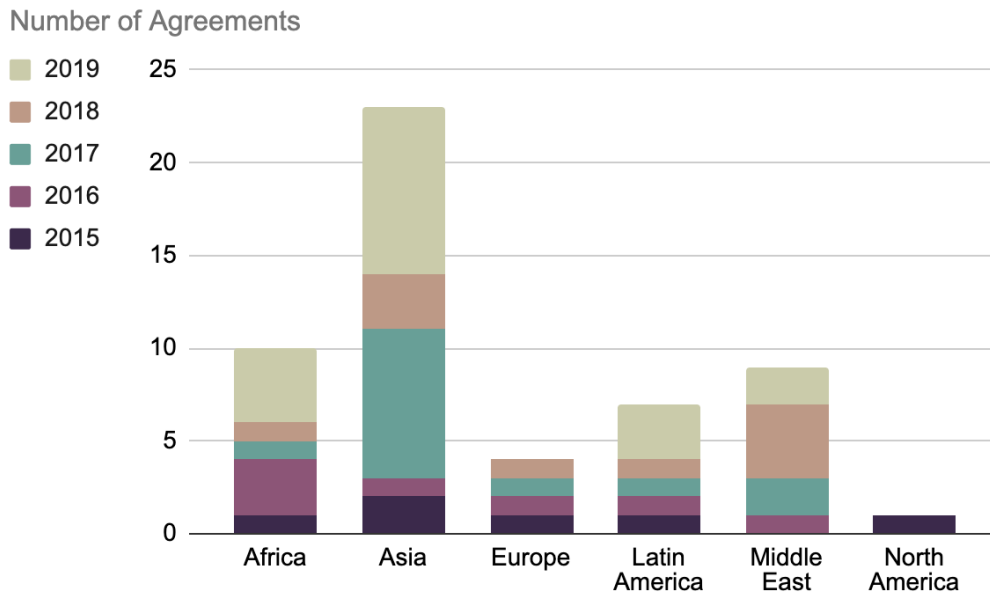
²⁰ Sputnik (2014) reports that it offers content available in the following languages: Russian, Abkhaz, Azerbaijani, Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Crimean Tatar, Dari, English, Estonian, French, Finnish, German, Georgian, Hindi, Japanese, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Latvian, Moldovan, Ossetian, Polish, Portuguese, Pashto, Spanish, Serbian, Tajik, Turkish, Uzbek, and Ukrainian.

Similar to the dynamics described with the PRC's content sharing partnerships, the Kremlin also has demonstrated interest in borrowing the local credibility of domestic media outlets in other countries to piggyback on their existing audiences to distribute its narratives. Bugayova and Barros (2020) argue that this is a more contemporary development, capturing 50 instances of new agreements signed between Russian state media and agencies in 39 counterpart countries after 2015, coinciding with Russia's revised "Information Security Doctrine." The Kremlin brokered agreements with outlets in every region (Figure 8), yet the preponderance of these overtures were in Asia (43 percent), followed by Africa (19 percent) and the Middle East (17 percent). There was also substantial emphasis on cooperation with China (7 agreements), India (4 agreements), Iran (3 agreements), and Indonesia (3 agreements).²¹

Although these agreements most often related to content or information sharing, some referenced joint projects and training for local journalists (Bugayova and Barros, 2020). For example, Sputnik and RT agreed to provide training for Cuba's Institute of Radio and Television and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, respectively (ibid). This emphasis on socializing the next generation of journalists to the Kremlin's standards and views is consistent with broader efforts such as the "Sputnik Pro Educational Project" which the outlet says has trained emerging journalists from 90 countries to date (Aregbesola, 2022). Other agreements cast their goals in more philosophical terms, cooperating with United News of India in 2019 to democratize and eliminate "Western media bias in presenting international information" and agreeing at the 2019 BRICS Summit that Sputnik would assist member nations to create a "unified fact-checking platform...to counter the dissemination of false information" (Bugayova and Barros, 2020).

²¹ There was one general agreement signed with BRICS countries included in the totals for China and India, while the others were all bilateral agreements.

Figure 8. Distribution of Kremlin Media Cooperation Agreements with Counterpart Outlets, 2015-2019



Notes: This visual shows the number of known media cooperation agreements signed between Russia state media and counterpart outlets in other countries during the period 2015 and 2019. Additional agreements that were initially considered but subsequently stalled or canceled are excluded. Source: Underlying data for this graph was pulled and adapted from analysis by Bugayova and Barros (2020).

Less visible than its international broadcasting and cooperative agreements, but equally if not more important are the Kremlin’s efforts to co-opt the governance of counterpart media outlets—either through buying up ownership shares or cultivating ties with other owners—in ways that have the potential to shape both what is covered and how. Vulnerability is highest for countries which have relatively small media markets with few alternative sources of information, high concentration of media in the hands of relatively few elites, and low degrees of transparency about who owns the media (Dumont et al., 2022). These attributes very much characterize several countries in Russia’s immediate backyard in Eastern Europe and Eurasia where this channel of influence is arguably most strongly felt.

In an in-depth analysis of top media outlets (print, TV, radio, online) across 17 countries associated with the former Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, Dumont et al. (2022) found that the Kremlin had deeply penetrated and compromised several media markets, as many of the most consumed outlets were either directly Russian owned or had owners with known or suspected ties with the Kremlin or Russian oligarchs through professional and personal connections. The most serious cases were Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine

(before the February 2022 invasion). Figure 9 shows what this co-optation can look like in an illustrative case like Moldova, where the Kremlin is in prime position to influence coverage across 3 of 5 of the country's most consumed TV outlets, 2 of 5 top newspapers, 1 radio station, and 4 of the most popular online news platforms (ibid).

Figure 9. Example of Russian Penetration of Local Media Markets — Moldova

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)	
Television	1	Prime	General Media Group Corp LLC	Vladimir Plahotniuc	100	
	2	Moldova 1	Teleradio-Moldova Company		100	
	3	Jurnal TV	Reforma Art LLC	Victor Topa	100	
	4	RTR Moldova		Sberbank		Unknown
				Rosmediakom	Vneshekonombank	Unknown
					VGTRK	Unknown
				Valentina Stetco	Valentina Stetco	25
	5	NTV Moldova	Exclusiv Media	Galina Sirbu		20
				Oxana Borsevici		5
	Newspaper	1	Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove	Exclusiv Media	Corneliu Furculita	100
2		Makler	Makler LLC	Olga Sviridova	50	
				Valeriu Zelinschi	50	
3		Jurnal de Chisinau	Reforma Art LLC	Victor Topa	100	
4		Arugmenti i Fakty	Exclusiv Media	Corneliu Furculita	100	
5		Ziarul de Garda	Publicatia Periodica Ziaruli de Garda SRL	Aneta Grosu		50
				Alina Radu		50
Radio	1	Radio Moldova	Teleradio-Moldova Company		100	
	2	Radio Noroc	Noroc Media SRL	Doinita Topala	100	

	3Radio Plai	Radio Plai SRL	Maria Covalenco	100
	4Hit FM	Radio Hit SRL	Jana Lozovan	75
			Pavel Lozovan	25
	5Jurnal FM	Reforma Art LLC	Victor Topa	100
	1Jurnal.md	Reforma Art LLC	Victor Topa	100
Online	2Protv.md	PPF Group	Petr Kellner Family	98.93
			Ladislav Bartonicek	0.535
			Jean-Pascal Duvieusart	0.535
	3Stiri.md	Simpals LLC	Dmitri Volosin	90
			Roman Stirbu	10
	4Point.md	Simpals LLC	Dmitri Volosin	90
			Roman Stirbu	10
	5Publika.md	General Media Group Corp LLC	Vladimir Plahotniuc	100

As Brandt (2022) discusses at length in her companion paper, Russia also relies heavily on covert actions to spread propaganda through social media and online news sites. This includes strategic use of trolls and targeted information operation campaigns to spread propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation, quickly and covertly. Paid Russian Internet trolls work to meet daily quotas by sharing across social media, but also undermine views that run “counter to Russian themes” by commenting on other sites such as discussion forums and news sites (Paul, 2016). Besides RT, there are dozens of other proxy news sites that share Russian propaganda but hide their affiliation. In the case of both the trolls and the proxy news sites, obfuscating that these sources are acting in the Kremlin’s interest is important to influence the target audience.

Trolls produce Russian propaganda quickly. They are “responsive and nimble” since they do not need to fact check, and often “repeat and recycle disinformation” to drill down on pro-Russian themes and messages (Paul, 2016). Social media quickly picks up Russian disinformation and disseminates it, and it is a near-impossible challenge to stop given that it is “rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and it lacks commitment to consistency” (Paul, 2016). This information could be intended to cause harm or

confusion or be benign but is all part of the Kremlin's broader goal to influence beyond its borders. While some of these efforts clearly target Western countries and organizations, such as the efforts to undermine the 2016 U.S. elections, others are merely to confuse the truth. Compared to military influence, these strategic communications efforts are relatively inexpensive. However, outside of Europe, Russia has made less significant gains by using these tactics than the U.S. usually fears (Rumer, 2021).

3.2 Education and Cultural Cooperation

Beyond the realm of media, the Kremlin has an expansive education and cultural exchange effort. It has historically granted an estimated 15,000 to 18,000 scholarships annually for international students to attend its universities (Study in Russia, 2022; Amur State University, 2022), with recipients receiving a modest monthly payment of 1300 rubles and student housing (Amur State University, 2022). Prior to the Ukraine invasion and the current wave of international sanctions, Russia was a relatively easy country to access for prospective study abroad candidates from Commonwealth of Independent States' countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), as it had "relatively lax visa requirements" compared to other popular destinations such as the U.S. and UK (Custer et al., 2021a).

The PRC's Confucius Institutes and Classrooms may have invited greater media attention, but the Kremlin has a much longer standing practice of opening Russian language and culture centers around the world. Custer et al. (2021a) identify some of the earliest examples opening as early as 1965 (New Delhi), 1974 (Dhaka), and 1975 (Mumbai). As of 2021-22, there were 338 Russian language and cultural centers open in 100 countries and semi-autonomous regions. These institutions are typically operated by one of two organizations, Rossotrudnichestvo²² or Russkiy Mir,²³ though the Gorchakov Fund,²⁴ Moscow House, Pushkin Institute, and Foundation for Support of Compatriots were involved in some cases. In keeping with the Kremlin's strong interests

²² Established in 2008, Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) is an autonomous agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that promotes political and economic cooperation with Russia, including management of the country's exchange programs (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

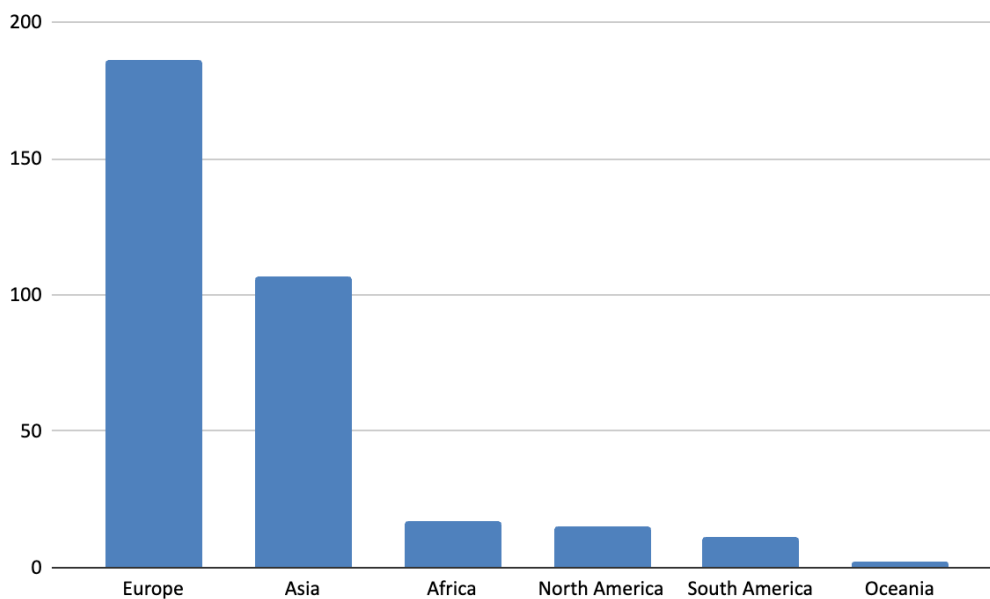
²³ Russkiy Mir was established in 2007 at Vladimir Putin's personal direction as an organization to promote the Russian language and culture as well as support ethnic Russians living abroad.

²⁴ The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, founded in 2010, promotes Russian culture abroad and provides funding to CSOs/NGOs.

in promoting Eurasianism (Watts et al., 2020), it is not surprising to see that Europe (55 percent) and Asia (32 percent) attracted the lion's share of these centers (Figure 10).

At the country level, the distribution of centers is somewhat more even as most receive between one and a handful of such institutions (Figure 11), though the top five recipients stand out as collectively accounting roughly one-fifth of the Kremlin's entire portfolio: Moldova (15), Bulgaria (14), Ukraine (14), China (11), Kyrgyzstan (10). Importantly, these numbers may not consider recent closures of centers because of the current hostilities in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the locations of these centers are also revealing—long prior to the 2022 invasion, there was a Russian language and cultural center in each of Ukraine's eastern oblasts,²⁵ which coincides with the Kremlin's broader strategic communications objective to use multiple influence tools to cultivate subcommunities sympathetic to its interests. As a marker of revealed priority, the Kremlin opened three centers each in Georgia's disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, more than 71 countries in Russia's portfolio which receive only 1 or 2.

Figure 10. Regional Distribution of Russian Language and Cultural Centers, Snapshot as of 2021-22

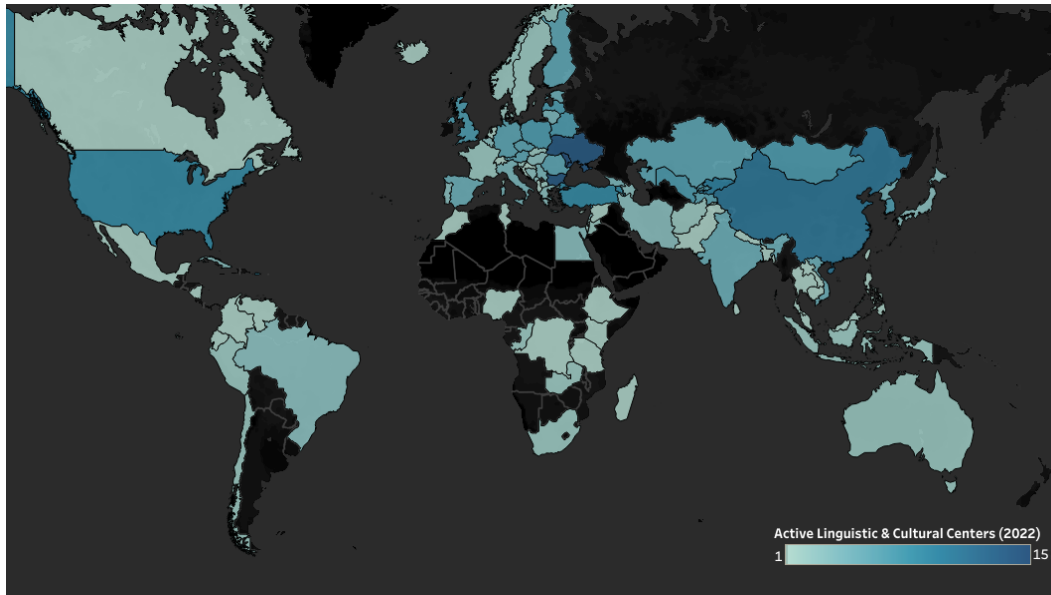


Note: This graph shows the regional breakdown of Russian language and cultural centers as of 2021-22 by geographic region; this may not reflect centers that were shut down by the authorities in the wake of

²⁵ Dnipropetrovsk: 1; Donetsk: 2; Gorlovka: 1; Kharkov: 1; Kherson: 1; Kyiv: 2; Luhansk: 2; Odessa: 2; Rovno: 2; Simferopol: 1

Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

Figure 11. Country Distribution of Russian Language and Cultural Centers, Snapshot as of 2021-22



Note: This gradient map shows the number of Russian language and cultural centers as of 2021-22 by country, this may not reflect centers shut down by the authorities in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Lighter colors indicate fewer centers, darker colors indicate a higher volume of centers, and black no known centers. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

In addition to global efforts, the Kremlin has pursued country- or region-specific initiatives to bolster people-to-people ties with key groups to elevate pro-Kremlin voices, promote shared identity, and encourage greater autonomy for disputed territories. Formal non-governmental organizations, informal community groups (e.g., Orthodox churches, Russian compatriot unions), think tanks, and schools are priority targets for Russian public diplomacy overtures, as these organizations can promote and legitimize Russian policies abroad (Vojtíšková et al., 2016).

For example, between 2015 and 2021, Custer et al. (2022a) identified over 710 cooperative projects between Kremlin-affiliated organizations²⁶ and counterpart organizations in 15 Eastern Europe and Eurasian countries. Local civil society organizations were the most common beneficiaries in 75 percent of these projects,

²⁶ In total, we identified 112 Kremlin-affiliated organizations who supplied financial or technical assistance, as well as event support and training to counterpart organizations in other countries. However, most projects were carried out by one of four organizations: Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian Embassy or Consulate General, Gorchakov Fund, or Russkiy Mir.

followed by local Russian compatriot unions (14 percent), schools (7 percent), and government agencies (8 percent). These cooperative efforts focused disproportionately on cultural events and educational programming that emphasized four key themes: youth patriotic education, Russia's leadership in fighting Nazi Germany and modern-day fascism, promoting shared religious ties between Orthodox communities, and Eurasian integration. The most favored recipients of these overtures also says a lot about the Kremlin's revealed preferences to focus on capital cities and disputed territories (such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, Republika Srpska, and Donbas).

4. Outcomes and Implications for US Strategic Communications

In this concluding section, we focus on answering the ‘so what’ and ‘now what’ questions to derive insights from this analysis of PRC and Kremlin strategic communications’ practices to inform how we think about what, if anything, the U.S. should do differently as a result. Specifically, we consider the following questions:

- What is the interplay of how Beijing and Moscow use multiple strategic communications tools and other instruments of power to advance their goals?
- To what extent do we see that Beijing and Moscow are successful in translating strategic communications inputs into changing the attitudes and behaviors of their target audiences?
- How might U.S. strategic communications seek to counter the strategic communications strengths of these competitors and exploit their relative weaknesses?

4.1 Synchronicity: Strategic Communications in Concert With Other Tools

Rather than treating their broadcasting and public diplomacy as siloed activities, we see very strong indications that the PRC and the Kremlin are strategic in synchronizing the two streams of strategic communications, along with other instruments of power to reinforce several key narratives. Moreover, there are some instances where these two authoritarian powers have joined forces (either explicitly or implicitly) to amplify each other's messages in areas of common interest.

Beijing has promoted several common narratives across its broadcasting and education and cultural exchange activities. A consistent thread is a bid to recast norms and reframe narratives related to governance and human rights in ways that are conducive to its interest. Instead of rejecting human rights, the PRC aims to redefine them: emphasizing collective over individual rights and economic over political rights. It raises up the PRC’s development model as one to which other countries can aspire, Beijing as a “good neighbor” and “responsible global leader” interested in win-win solutions and

working together as part of a “community of common destiny.” Not only are these common refrains in the PRC’s state-run media and senior leader communications, but they are also reinforced by its education and exchange programs which train journalists, law enforcement, border patrol agents, justice officials, future leaders among other key demographics.

The most powerful combination of instruments in the PRC’s foreign policy toolkit is arguably how it exploits natural synergies between its broadcasting, public diplomacy, and economic power. In several AidData surveys of global leaders in low- and middle-income countries, the most common reasons given for why they view Beijing favorably and as having substantial influence over their policy priorities is due to the PRC’s economic importance to their countries (Custer et al., 2021a, 2021b). This subjective perception is based on objective fact, for the PRC is now the world’s largest financier of overseas development projects (Malik et al., 2021), the largest official creditor (Horn et al., 2019), and the number one trading partner for 70 percent of the world’s countries. Beijing amplifies this narrative through ensuring that its economic assistance is highly publicized by its state-run media, its CIs and CCs reinforce the appeal of learning Mandarin and studying in China as a gateway to economic opportunity.

Of course, just as multiple tools can work together, they can also undercut each other, and this is very much true for the PRC. Beijing’s assertiveness in projecting strength via reconnaissance aircraft and civilian fishing boats to assert maritime claims in the South China Sea, for example, do send a powerful signal, but arguably not one that wins it very many friends (Custer et al., 2018). Similarly, the strong association in people’s minds between China and the Belt and Road Initiative has proven to be a double-edged sword, making Beijing vulnerable to accusations of encouraging irresponsible borrowing behaviors and worsening corruption within partner countries (Horigoshi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, its heavy-handedness in mobilizing overseas Chinese students to promote the “China dream” and curbing the independence of journalists both at home and abroad has generated both attention and pushback.

Comparatively, less of Russia’s emphasis has been on its appeal as offering economic opportunities for other countries, though that has been true on a more limited basis in promoting the Eurasian Union specifically and Eurasian integration more generally. Certainly, the Kremlin has used both strategic communications and its position as an

energy power to shore up its economic importance to countries particularly in its near abroad and many of its neighbors still rely heavily on remittance flows from family members working in Russia. Nevertheless, more of Russia's efforts build upon pre-existing language and cultural ties with post-Soviet states, as well as appeal to shared values (anti-Westernism, conservatism) with foreign publics farther afield.

Noticeably, Russia's state-run media reinforced emphases seen in its education and cultural cooperation activities. In an in-depth analysis of TASS and Sputnik coverage, Custer et al. (2022a) found that nationalist and far-right groups were frequently mentioned to heighten anxiety about rampant neo-Nazism in ways that complimented the Kremlin's educational programming featuring its role in fighting Nazi Germany in the second World War. Russian state media raised the profile of Eurosceptic parties, Orthodox churches, and pro-Kremlin institutions in ways that were consistent with its education/cultural cooperation with these actors, while discrediting pro-European parties and organizations. Stories positioned Russia's actions in Donbas or Crimea, as well as Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, as examples of the Kremlin serving as the natural security partner, in line with its emphasis on youth patriotic education. Russian media coverage and cooperation efforts sought to increase the credibility and capacity of local authorities and civic actors in breakaway regions to assert autonomy and align with Moscow.

4.2 Outcomes: How Have Target Audiences Responded to the PRC and Russia?

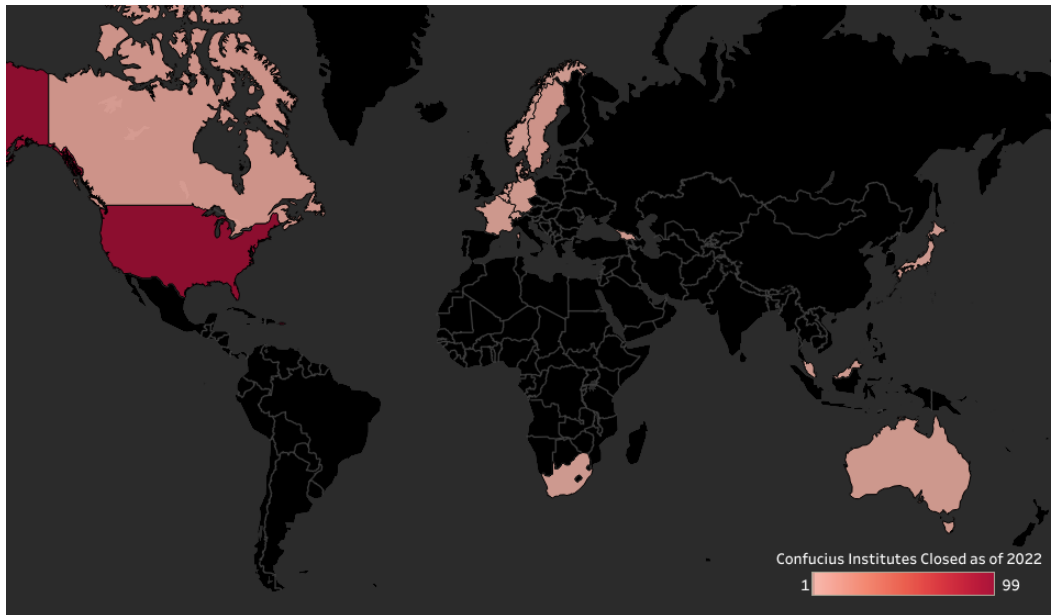
As we have seen, the PRC and the Kremlin each have an ample array of strategic communications tools to potentially shape popular attitudes, media narratives, and elite behavior in ways that advance their respective economic, geopolitical, and security interests. Nevertheless, we must be wary of conflating inputs with outcomes. Just because they are doubling down on international broadcasting, partnerships with local media, as well as education and cultural exchange programs, does not necessarily mean that the PRC and the Kremlin are winning the world one yuan or ruble at a time. Participation rates (e.g., consumption of state broadcasting, volume of students studying abroad, agreements signed between host and counterpart institutions) do offer a way to gauge demand, or at least, reveal interest on the part of foreign publics in what the PRC or the Kremlin have to offer.

Nearly half a million foreign students from 196 countries chose to study in China in 2018 (the last year of available data),²⁷ making it one of the world's most popular study abroad destinations (China MoE, 2019), while 31 percent of the recipients of PRC scholarships surveyed in 2018 said they were encouraged to apply by a personal contact (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018). Nevertheless, the annual rate of growth in new international students studying abroad in China had begun to slow down, even prior to COVID-19 (Hartley, 2019). The PRC's zero-COVID policies have likely tarnished its appeal as the lead story in prospective students read more and more stories of "stranded" peers, unable to begin or resume their studies, due to travel restrictions (Yau et al., 2021; Custer et al., 2021).

In parallel, the increasing number of universities and schools that host CIs and CCs, as well as domestic media outlets signing content sharing agreements with PRC state media are also indications of a groundswell of demand. However, the PRC's CIs and CCs have stoked considerable debate between those that see these institutions as a danger to national security and academic freedom versus those who feel they add value or at least do limited harm. The increased scrutiny has led to highly publicized closures in some cases, particularly the United States (Figure 5), along with parliamentary inquiries and executive branch review of existing Confucius center agreements in Australia (Power, 2021) and India (Krishnan, 2020), among more muted concerns raised in other countries.

²⁷ From modest initial growth in students of about 5 percent a year in 2014-15, China's intake of new students skyrocketed in 2016-17 with growth rates of 10-12 percent (China MoE, 2017).

Figure 5. Total Number of Closures of Confucius Institutes, by Country, as of 2022



Note: This gradient map shows the number of closures of Confucius Institutes (CCs are excluded) as of 2021 by country. Lighter colors indicate one or more closures, darker colors indicate a higher volume of closures, and black no known closures. Source: Underlying data collected via web scraping by AidData staff and research assistants.

There are some indications that the PRC's investments are paying dividends in advancing its goals. A survey of PRC scholarships found that international students were more positive towards China the longer they studied abroad (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018).²⁸ In a series of studies on the PRC's media cooperation and public diplomacy activities in the Asia-Pacific, Custer et al. (2018, 2019a, 2019b) found that the PRC's Confucius Institutes, content-sharing partnerships, sister cities, and ambassador op-eds were associated with more favorable citizen views of the PRC's senior leadership.

Brazys and Dukalskis (2019), meanwhile, found that proximity to an active Confucius Institute was associated with more positive reporting about China within African media organizations. In addition to affecting the tone of coverage, Custer et al. (2019a) argue that the PRC's efforts may also have a "chilling effect" on criticism such that it affects what stories are covered at all, particularly regarding Beijing's human rights practices. Given that poorer and less democratic countries attract a disproportionate share of

²⁸ In their global study, Myungsik and Elaine (2018) found that most international students who resided in China for three or more years reported having positive impressions of China, regardless of their original views.

Beijing's scholarships, this may make these countries particularly vulnerable to PRC influence.²⁹

The COVID-19 era is instructive in illuminating how the PRC synchronized its broadcasting, economic assistance, and public diplomacy to win friends and allies, particularly in the Global South. Although Beijing's so-called mask diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy, attracted a fair amount of derision in the international media, the perspective from low- and middle-income countries was quite different. In two AidData surveys of policymakers in South and Central Asia (2021) and Africa (2022), respondents largely gave the PRC high marks to the PRC for adapting its public diplomacy more effectively than other great powers in the era of COVID-19 and that its assistance during the pandemic had made them feel more favorably to Beijing (Custer et al., 2021a; Horigoshi et al., 2022).

Yet, there are several indications that attitudes towards China are not uniform and are in fact becoming more polarized. As Repnikova (2022) notes in her companion paper, perceptions of the PRC in liberal democracies tend to be more negative, while the PRC appears to be more successful in winning support from parts of the Global South such as Africa. Recent AidData analysis of attitudes towards the PRC across low- and middle-income countries, reinforces this view. Horigoshi et al. (2022) find that while the PRC has maintained a core base of support in surveys conducted across the Global South between 2005 and 2021, the share of citizens who disapprove of the PRC is growing and there are fewer undecideds after 2015. The PRC performs best with low-income countries which rely on its economic assistance more heavily (ibid).

Although the Kremlin is thought to inflate the reported audience metrics for state-run media (GEC, 2022), metrics from recipient countries about their top-most consumed media outlets might provide a more reliable barometer. If we take the case of Eastern Europe and Eurasia—the region in which Russia's media broadcasting is most heavily concentrated—Kremlin affiliated media do make an appearance in the top-five most consumed outlets (by media type) in some countries including: Argumenty i Fakty (Moscow government) in Uzbekistan and Ukraine, Russian Channel 1 in Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan (Channel One Eurasia subsidiary), as well as privately held outlets Komsomolskaya Pravda, Humor FM, Russkoe Radio and Russian Planet in Belarus.

²⁹ Myungsik and Elaine (2018) found that nearly 90 percent of the scholarship students they surveyed came from partly free or not free countries and 62 percent of the scholarship students belonged to countries that had a GDP per capita lower than that of China.

In other countries in the region, Russian state media was nowhere to be seen in the most consumed outlets, despite major investments to that effect. Globally, despite the uptick in media cooperation agreements between 2015 and 2019, others were stalled or withdrawn under circumstances that shed light on growing misgivings about Russian state media. EU sanctions against Russia related to Crimea and the Skripal poisoning reportedly disrupted Sputnik's operations in Estonia and Latvia (Bugayova and Barros, 2020). In other cases, governments in Slovakia and the Philippines backed away from cooperation with Sputnik and RT, because of public outcry (ibid). Perhaps the strongest reaction of all was in Lithuania, which deported Sputnik's chief editor in May 2019 for five years, citing the Russian journalist as "a threat to national security" (ibid). The EU's March 2022 decision to sanction and suspend the broadcasting activities of RT and Sputnik was a blow to Russia's strategic communications capabilities, as it resulted in the closures of its facilities across the bloc (Council of Europe, 2022).

Prior to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin was charting steady growth in attracting a growing number of international students to study in Russia, reaching 395 million by 2021: a net increase of 112 million from 2016 (Statista, 2022b). Russia's attraction as a study abroad destination has been strongest and most durable among countries within its near abroad, particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan which together accounted for roughly half of its international student population in the 2020-21 academic year (ibid). However, there is also an indication of its growing ties to China and India, which sent the third and sixth largest numbers of students to study in Russia that same year (ibid). Yet, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent international sanctions against the Kremlin, have majorly disrupted this status quo, as foreign universities who had sent students to Russia began evacuating them and/or strongly advising their imminent return home (Packer, 2022).

Meanwhile, if the Kremlin is banking on shared language and cultural identity as the cornerstone of its influence strategy, there are some early warning signs that these ties are weakening in its near abroad. In an extensive review of their language and education policies, Custer et al. (2021a) found that the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have all either "proposed changing, begun transitioning, or have already switched their alphabet from the Cyrillic to Latin Script." There is waning interest among young people to learn Russian as a foreign language and governments in the region are promoting other foreign languages such as English or Mandarin to support multiple objectives of

de-Russification, national pride, and economic opportunities (ibid). This linguistic transition may ultimately have ripple-effects in terms of depressing future consumption of its Russian-language media and ability to continuously attract international students.

4.3 Implications: Key Takeaways for U.S. Strategic Communications

Both China and Russia have formidable strategic communications capabilities, but as we have seen, they are imperfect. Stepping back from the specific tools and tactics to take a broader view, there are several takeaways for U.S. leaders to consider as they seek to revitalize America's international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts to ensure it wins the narrative.

Insight #1. Pay more attention to Africa—the U.S. is underinvesting in strategic communications on the continent compared to its competitors, which is a growing source of public opinion vulnerability

Africa is an up-and-coming area of interest for both the PRC (in its broadcasting operations) and, to a lesser extent, Russia (through its media cooperation efforts). The PRC tends to attract more favorable views from citizens in Africa because of its economic importance to the continent (further amplified by its strategic communications), as well as Russia to a lesser extent (Repnikova, 2022). Similarly, a 2022 AidData survey of African leaders from 55 countries and semi-autonomous regions found that they preferred China's development model to that of the U.S. (Horigoshi et al., 2022), though Russia garnered the least favorable views of all, likely a reaction to the invasion of Ukraine.

Comparatively, Africa is a relative afterthought in America's own practice, as a share of financing for strategic communications and as a congressional priority. Remediating this status quo could involve expanding the mandate and resources for existing efforts such as Voice of America's existing division focused on Africa or collaborating with like-minded partner countries such as the UK or France that may have additional broadcasting operations oriented towards this part of the world given past colonial ties.

Insight #2. Don't go dollar for dollar in symmetrically outspending the PRC and Kremlin on broadcasting; engage asymmetrically by undercutting their ability to borrow local credibility

The greater risk to U.S. interests is not necessarily the official broadcasting operations of the PRC and Russia, which target audiences often recognize as propaganda, and discount their credibility accordingly, but rather the ability of Beijing and Moscow to borrow local credibility through cooperation agreements, ownership stakes, and training/exchange programs with media outlets and journalists in other countries. These pathways of influence are more insidious because they are more difficult to track due to the opacity of the PRC and the Kremlin regarding their own activities, a lack of legislation within recipient countries that require transparent disclosure of content sources and outlet ownership, as well as less well-developed journalistic standards and training in many recipient countries.

Remedying this status quo could involve extending the mandate and resources of existing efforts to reduce vulnerability to co-optation by PRC or Kremlin state media, as well as support new initiatives in this area. Examples of existing efforts which could be further strengthened include: the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance, the State Department's Edward R. Murrow Program for emerging journalists and the International Visitor Leadership Program in the fields of journalism and media, USAID's local media strengthening, civil society development, and rule of law work, as well as the new International Fund for Public Interest Media set up after President Biden's Democracy Summit, among others. In parallel, the Global Engagement Center could be tasked with the mandate and resources to track and publish publicly available information on PRC and Kremlin ownership shares and content sharing/cooperation agreements with domestic media outlets.

Insight #3. Take a page out of the competitors' playbook, orient broadcasting and public diplomacy to emphasize mutually reinforcing themes

The PRC and Kremlin are very intentional and systematic in looking for coherence and consistency across two streams of their strategic communications: broadcasting and education/cultural exchange. Yet, that degree of coherence does not appear to be the case for U.S. strategic communications given the extent of interagency coordination

challenges. Rather than a generic appeal for greater coordination, U.S. leaders could get the incentives right to generate small wins in this area through establishing an innovation fund that agency personnel could apply via a competitive process to access supplemental resources for programming that effectively integrates U.S. broadcasting and exchange capabilities to reinforce themes related to the October 2022 National Security Strategy.

A departure point for designing this fund could be the Department of Defense's Minerva DECUR partnership which issues grants of up to US\$400,000 with the intent to spur collaborative research between Defense Professional Military Education institutions and civilian research universities on priority topics of interest to DOD. Even though the context was somewhat different, Minerva DECUR was designed to increase the benefits, to reduce the perceived transaction costs, of cooperation across traditional silos by tying resources to the desired behaviors, shrinking the change to discrete projects, and providing a process for identifying the best applicants and ensuring accountability for results.

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Background Research
Gates Forum I

China-Russia Strategic
Communications: Evolving
Visions and Practices

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Introduction

This paper examines Chinese and Russian state-led strategic communications objectives and practices. The analysis starts out by presenting the overarching visions of China and Russia in expanding their external communication capabilities, including how these goals have evolved over time and how the two regimes envision and prioritize their target audiences. The paper then proceeds to engage with major actors charged with implementing these visions in both states, as well as with key strategies that are part of Russia and China's strategic communications toolkit. The final sections address the areas of convergence and divergence in the strategic communications of China and Russia, as well as the effects or implications of their practices, including the reactions of key target audiences and the challenges and opportunities they present to U.S. national interests. Before proceeding to the analysis, it is important to note that the actual term "strategic communications" is not popularized in the two countries, and concepts like soft power, information warfare, external propaganda, and discourse power tend to be used instead. This paper, therefore, draws on these concepts and how they are understood in China and Russia, with a special focus on the varied interpretations of soft power.

Section I: Strategic Objectives

In formulating their strategic communications objectives, Chinese and Russian officials and experts underscore their discontent with Western dominance (and especially with that of the United States) over the international communication system.¹ They also aim to strengthen the relative positioning of their media outlets and, more broadly, their voices in the international system. China approaches this with a dual strategy of persuasion or "selling" of China's story, as well as more defensive push-backs on perceived Western rhetorical attacks. Russian strategy features less persuasion and more counter-propaganda and information warfare against the West. In conceiving their external communication strategic visions, both China and Russia are also driven by domestic audiences and domestic regime legitimacy. China, however, has ambitions for acceptance by the international community and international institutions, whereas

¹ The international communication system primarily refers to the political economy of global communications (i.e. Western news outlets dominating the global media ecosystem), as well as to the agenda-setting power of global communicators (i.e. the West, including politicians and media, setting the discursive agenda). Increasingly, both China and Russia are also concerned about Western dominance of global communication infrastructure.

Russia is more interested in manifesting its exceptionalism and reclaiming a more expansive vision of the “Russian world.” I proceed to examine these arguments in more detail, starting with China’s strategic communications objectives.

China’s Strategic Communications Objectives

China’s top leaders have prioritized the importance of constructing a positive external image over the past three decades. Starting in the mid-2000s, Chinese authorities and experts have enthusiastically adopted Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power,” incorporated it into high-level speeches, and widely scrutinized it in academic publications (Repnikova 2022). For China to fully rise as a great power, according to Chinese experts, it needs recognition and acceptance by the international community. For instance, Yu Guoming, a well-known Chinese communications expert, argued that the limited acceptance of China compromises its global influence: “The strength of our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, we remain a crippled giant” (Guo and Lye 2011, cited in Zhao 2013). International communication, often officially referred to as “external propaganda,” is seen as an integral part of China’s image-making and recognition.

Over time, the official emphasis on strategic communications has shifted from justifying China’s participation in the international community towards narrating its success story and, more recently, positioning itself as a guide or an inspiration to other countries. These shifts correspond to the Chinese leadership’s evolving perceptions of China’s relative strength and developmental trajectory. These shifts can also be explained by the increasing deterioration in US-China relations and the Chinese government positioning itself as capable of withstanding competition with the United States. Finally, the shifts are linked to the change in China’s leadership. Xi Jinping’s leadership has been more focused on China’s international standing and more reliant on nationalistic politics domestically. I detail these shifts in external communication priorities below, starting with the Jiang Zemin era.

At the 1999 External Propaganda Conference, Jiang Zemin called for presenting a hard-working, reform-oriented image of China (Jiang Zemin Zai Quanguo... 1999). At the 2003 National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference, Hu Jintao stressed

the need to accurately communicate China's position in international affairs and showcase China's economic, political, and intellectual developments (Renmin Ribao 2003). The Hu Jintao era is also when we see the first mention of cultural soft power in top leadership speeches (Hu Jintao Zai Dang... 2007). This rhetorical endorsement was accompanied by a major global expansion of China's state-owned media outlets, with the Chinese government pouring an estimated \$6 billion into this initiative (Cook 2020).

Under Xi Jinping, we have seen a shift towards a more ambitious approach in global communication. During his visit to the country's main media outlets in 2016, Xi Jinping called for journalists to better tell China's story (Yu Danghe Renmin Tonghuxi...2016). In his major external communications speech in 2022, Xi underscored the importance of promoting China's approaches and views on development and global governance (Jiaqiang He Gaijin...2021). Under Xi, China no longer strives to fit into the international community but to position itself as one of the leaders and potential alternatives to the West. The key narrative that China tries to convey is that its vision of the world order is more equitable—the idea is captured by slogans like “community of shared destiny” and “major country diplomacy.” Xi's announcement of the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative at the UNGA meeting last year embodies these narratives and reveals his aspirations for positioning China as a major power interested in shaping global governance and contributing to international communications, especially in the Global South.

Closely entwined with the mission of persuading the international community about the legitimacy of China's political governance and benevolence of its global engagements, China's strategic communications are also concerned with rebuking the perceived damaging anti-China narratives produced by the West and especially by Western media. The concerns and disillusionment with Western media have built over the past two decades. In recent years under Xi Jinping, we see an expansion in China's more assertive communication. Practicing what is now widely described as “wolf warrior

diplomacy,”² Chinese diplomats deploy both defensive and offensive tactics to counter Western narratives. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, some of China’s diplomatic and state media communications can also be characterized as disinformation.

China’s soft persuasion and defensive communication strategies can be somewhat contradictory. Xi Jinping’s call for shaping a “loveable” image of China conflicts with provocative messaging spread by some Chinese diplomats. These tensions reflect the larger frictions in China’s image-making and strategic communications, as China attempts to carve out a distinct image of itself as a benevolent major power that wants to improve the international system. Yet it fears to appear as weak vis-à-vis the West, and thereby constructs its image in part as a reaction to the West.

Russia’s Evolving Strategic Communications Objectives and Visions

As with China, the idea of soft power resonated with the Russian leadership, starting in the mid-2000s. For Russian experts and officials, the concept was intrinsically linked to the US’s dominant position in the international system, as well as to “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003 through 2005 (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Putin incorporated this concept into a high-level speech for the first time in 2007 (Putin 2007). During this period, the Russian government also launched a new communications and public diplomacy infrastructure, including Russia’s biggest international broadcaster, RT (launched in 2005), and the Russkiy Mir Foundation (2007), a government-sponsored organization charged with promoting Russian language, history, and culture around the world.

Similarly to China, Russia’s vision for strategic communications has evolved over time in a more assertive direction. Russian officials, however, have placed more emphasis on Western soft power as a threat and have underscored the importance of information

² The concept is associated with the 2015 film titled *Wolf Warrior* and especially its 2017 sequel, *Wolf Warrior II*. Both films present a dramatic action plot about the People’s Liberation Army defending China’s global interests, including in Africa. Initially, the term “wolf warrior” appeared on Chinese social media following the release of the *Wolf Warrior II* film, as a critique of nationalism. Later this term has been deployed by Western commentators to characterize China’s demonstrative assertiveness in the diplomatic arena, especially in cyber diplomacy. Frequent commentaries by China’s official spokespeople, including Zhao Lijian, accusing the United States of double standards and probing at the weaknesses in the US democracy are manifestations of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy.

warfare, in addition to public diplomacy. These shifts towards an overtly anti-Western positioning in Russia's soft power are linked to the domestic legitimization of Putin's regime through a narrative of Russia as a counterweight to the West. The emphasis on external competition (and enemies) facilitates domestic nationalism and unifies the public behind a shared mission of defending Russia's interests. The West, and especially the United States, is also seen as posing increasing risks to Putin's legitimacy, not only as a leader of Russia but also as a leader of the Eurasian region. In the following analysis, I explain Putin's contradictory and combative conception of soft power during the past decade.

Post-2012, Russia's interpretation of soft power increasingly fused self-promotion with self-defense and information warfare against the West. The 2013 influential white paper on foreign policy (*Kontseptsia Vneshnei Politiki...2013*), for instance, describes soft power as at once an "integral part of contemporary international politics" and a potentially destructive instrument (*Kontseptsia Vneshnei Politiki...2013*, p. 7). Similar characterizations of soft power are apparent in Putin's speeches and writings. On the one hand, Putin laments Russia's image as being distorted by others, decries Russia's failure in better explaining its position to the world (Putin 2012b), and calls for more effective diplomacy. At the same time, he repeatedly labels soft power with negative connotations as a tool deployed by other powers for illicit goals of political interference. "Unfortunately, these methods are often used to nurture and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism...and directly interfere in the internal politics of sovereign states," Putin argued in his pre-election article in *Moskovskie Novosti* (Putin 2012a). Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the influential Russian foreign policy publication, *Russia in Global Affairs*, has described this combination of explaining Russia's vision and defending against the West as "counter-propaganda" (Lukyanov 2014). Russia attempts to communicate its values and visions in large part by framing itself as in opposition to the West.

Counter-propaganda is complemented by more offensive strategies of information warfare (*informatsionnaia voina*) widely advocated in Russia since 2012. Most clearly articulated in the Gerasimov Doctrine, the concept of information warfare calls for the deployment of information tools and strategies to battle enemies by sowing chaos and disorder (Gerasimov, 2013). This more militaristic mission has also been echoed by leading Russian propagandists. RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, in a 2012

interview with the Russian Daily, *Kommersant*, compared her channel to the Ministry of Defense. Referring to the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, she argued that RT was waging an information war “against the whole Western world” (Gabuev 2012).

In recent years, information warfare has been more prominently featured in high-level rhetoric about strategic communications, with Russia described as being in an existential battle with the West. During a 2021 speech at the FSB, for instance, Putin stressed that Russia is facing deliberate information campaigns against it on a range of issues, including in Russia’s battle against the coronavirus and its accomplishments in the medical sphere (Zasedaniye Kollegii FSB Rossii 2021). At the International Economic Forum in Saint Petersburg in June 2022, Putin portrayed Western predictions about Russia’s economic downfall in response to sanctions as propaganda and psychological warfare against Russian society. He also dismissed these efforts as ineffective (Plenarnoe Zasedanie Peterburgskogo Mezhdunarodnogo Ekonomicheskogo Forumu 2022). Other than directly battling the West, Putin advocates for improving Russia’s image through self-confidence. In response to a question about soft power at the same international forum, Putin said that “the most important thing is to respect ourselves. There is no need to try our hardest to prove to someone that we are good, no need to do that...If we treat ourselves, our history, and culture with respect, people will come to us” (Putin 2022). In 2012, Putin was still committed to explaining Russia correctly to global audiences; in 2022, he appears to have largely abandoned this objective in favor of self-confidence and self-defense.

This section demonstrated that both China and Russia strive to compete for global narratives with the West and especially with the United States. Both regimes have also shifted towards a more nationalistic orientation that translates into more assertive communication objectives and strategies. At the same time, China’s leadership, even under Xi Jinping, is still interested in soft persuasion or co-optation of global publics. By contrast, Russian leadership is less invested in constructing Russia’s image and more focused on de-constructing the legitimacy of the West.

Section II: Target Audiences

For both China and Russia, target audiences include international, diasporic, and domestic publics. It is difficult to ascertain which audiences are most prioritized;

arguably, all three groups are targeted at the same time. When it comes to global publics, there is an emphasis on the West in both Chinese and Russian official discourses, with the West being understood as the most competitive terrain for soft power and strategic communications. Below, I introduce each target audience group in some detail, starting with international audiences.

International and Non-diasporic Audiences

The international audience for Russia and China's strategic communications can be broadly divided into audiences: (1) in the West and other major powers, (2) in neighboring regions, and (3) in the Global South.

In China's high-level official speeches on public diplomacy, there is a notable hierarchy of global priorities. Major countries, including the United States, Russia, and the European Union, are invoked as diplomatic priorities. Neighboring countries present a second-tier priority, driven by China's regional security considerations. Finally, China has significantly expanded its diplomatic outreach to developing countries, especially as part of the Belt and Road initiative and due to Xi's diplomatic concept of a "community of shared destiny."

Some Chinese scholars, like Wu Zhicheng and Liu Peidong, capture the different layers of China's diplomatic outreach as the following: large countries' relations present the key element; neighboring countries are the priority; and developing countries are the fundamentals (Wu and Liu 2022). While it is challenging to measure the geographic distribution of China's soft power and strategic communications resources, it is notable how, at least up until the recent escalation in US-China relations under President Trump, much of China's diplomatic capability was oriented towards the United States (and the West more broadly). My interviews with Chinese state media professionals revealed that the top talent was sent to the US. Until recently, the United States was also home to the largest number of China's Confucius Institutes (at its peak, there were 110 Confucius Institutes in the US; this number decreased to about 20 by 2021).³

³ Please see:

http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=1&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191&geography_type=country&max_year=2021&min_year=2004&per_capita_type=absolute&selected_view=line&tech_assist_types=39%2C40%2C41%2C42.

As for neighboring countries, China is highly invested in strengthening its soft power there, including via communications outreach, in large part because it sees them as pivotal for upholding regional security. China is also competing with the United States for leadership in the Asia-Pacific and in Southeast Asia, and it deploys strategic communications as part of this competition. During the pandemic, for instance, the Chinese government combined extensive pandemic aid with strategic communications through local media outlets and social media platforms to promote a positive story about China's handling of the pandemic.⁴

With China's expansive economic presence in developing countries (especially in Africa), the Chinese government has also ramped up its communications outreach there over the past decade, in part to battle Western narratives about neocolonialism. Some experts argue that since the launch of the BRI, the Chinese government has redirected external propaganda resources from Western developed countries towards developing countries (Wang 2022). In 2012, for instance, China's state television broadcaster, CGTN, launched a regional bureau in Nairobi, and the Chinese government now trains thousands of African journalists as part of its strategic communications effort, amongst other initiatives.

For the Kremlin, the West constitutes a key target of competition for narratives and information warfare. Unlike China, which targets all Western audiences, Russia focuses on communicating with marginalized publics (on both the left and the right of the political spectrum) whose opinions are less featured in the current system (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doodly 2021). RT (formerly known as *Russia Today*), for instance, frequently relies on conspiracy theories to provoke discord and questioning of the status quo. RT also routinely invites public figures from extreme political spectrums on its talk shows to probe into the weaknesses of American society and political governance. These techniques are part of an effort to exacerbate existing societal divisions in the US and in other major democracies.

Starting in 2012, as Russia's leadership announced a pivot towards Asia, China and India were also highlighted as diplomatic priorities (Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federstsii, 2013; Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federstsii, 2016). As a result,

⁴ See: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/chinese-diplomacy-southeast-asia-during-covid-19-pandemic>

there are signs of Russia's more expansive communication outreach to these countries. Since 2020, for instance, China and Russia have held annual summits on digital media (Ria Novosti 2015). There is less institutionalized media collaboration between Russia and India beyond the framework of the BRICS, but some informal partnerships are taking hold. In April 2022, Russia's *Kommersant* reported that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Republic of India had sent a letter to private outlets in India, asking them to reduce the degree of criticism about Russia's war in Ukraine (Indiiskie SMI Proidut Faik Kontrol' 2022).

Former Soviet countries make up the next strategic audience, largely interlinked with the outreach towards Russian "compatriots" discussed earlier. In recent years since Russia's involvement in the conflict in Syria, Russian authorities have started to emphasize Russia's influence in the Global South, including in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. In contrast to China, however, Russia's diplomatic outreach to the Global South has been more modest in scale, though some efforts, like *RT* programming in local languages, have been relatively successful.

Diasporic Audiences

As for targeting voices in the diaspora, the Chinese government has been carrying out a large-scale communication outreach to "overseas Chinese" (*huawai ren/huaqiao ren*) since the start of the reform era, much predating the emergence of the concept of soft power. Initially, outreach focused more on securing overseas investment; over time, it has shifted towards facilitating sympathies towards the CCP, as well as mitigating anti-CCP voices. Strategic communications has been strategically deployed for this purpose, including the expansion of Chinese state media broadcasting targeting specifically overseas Chinese (via CCTV-4) and the investment in and training of editors and journalists at Chinese diasporic media (China News Agency 2016). More recently, the CCP's outreach has focused on spreading pro-China content to diasporic communities via digital platforms (Menn 2021).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has also been actively targeting Russian-speaking diasporas officially referred to as "compatriots" (*sootchestvennik*)—the term that encompasses ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, as well as anyone with a cultural connection to Russia. Echoing the visions of the CCP,

the Kremlin's outreach to "compatriots" is driven by a mission to strengthen pro-Russia (and pro-Kremlin regime) sympathies. For Russia, however, diasporic outreach arguably presents a more critical mission for the regime's legitimacy, considering Putin's quest to recreate and protect the "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*) and the positioning of Russia as a major power in Eurasia. The Russian regime's outreach to "compatriots" includes communications via international state media broadcasters (RT and *Sputnik* broadcasting in Russian, English and local languages) and domestic media outlets that are often accessible in neighboring regions. It also includes disinformation and "information flooding" via troll armies on sensitive issues and, in some cases, cyberattacks in retaliation for governments' treatment of Russian compatriots.⁵

Domestic Audiences

Finally, it is important to underscore that China and Russia's strategic communications efforts simultaneously target external and domestic audiences. China's interpretation of soft power positions it as a part of its national rejuvenation and its efforts to facilitate pride and a sense of national belonging amongst Chinese citizens (Repnikova 2022). Russia's treatment of soft power as a destabilizing Western influence translates into strategic communications that are in large part directed at resurrecting a sense of patriotism amongst Russian citizens. Both regimes see soft power and strategic communications as part of their routine efforts to bolster political legitimacy and regime resilience.

For China, the softer narratives about China's economic accomplishments (especially in comparison to the West), as well as the more antagonistic, explicitly anti-Western narratives communicated by some diplomats on Twitter, are also widely translated and diffused across domestic communication platforms. For Russia, the stories about its defense of conservatism, including traditional values, vis-à-vis the "immoral" West deliberately play into disappointments with the West among some Russian elites, as well as the trepidations about infusion of Western liberal values among some Russian citizens (Laurelle 2021).

⁵ The 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia after Estonia voted to remove Soviet-era statues is a good example of such counterattacks. During the current war with Ukraine, there have been allegations of Russia's cyberattacks against Ukrainian servers.

As with the distinctions in China and Russia's larger visions for image-crafting, when it comes to domestic audiences, China attempts to present an image of itself as an aspirational and confident great power, capable of contributing to the international system but also resisting the West. Russia, by contrast, appears to construct its image for domestic audiences in large part by "othering" the West as the harbinger of immoral values and behaviors and presenting Russia as the righteous (and the only) alternative.

Domestic persuasion is complemented by the censorship of external content, especially of Western media coverage. In both China and Russia, Western journalists have faced significant infringements on their freedom of reporting in recent years. In its 2021 report, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China shared that foreign media professionals are experiencing "unprecedented hurdles" due to the Chinese government's efforts to impede independent reporting.⁶ The Russian government has heavily restricted access to Western media websites within Russia, and this past June, it passed a new law that enables the banning Western outlets in retaliation against Western bans of Russian state broadcasters.⁷ The two regimes, but especially the Chinese Communist Party, have also long restricted access to Western social media platforms, despite actively using them to promote their visions and narratives to external publics.

This section introduced the core target audiences of Chinese and Russian official strategic communications, including global publics, diasporic publics, and domestic audiences. This simultaneous targeting of three sets of audiences does present some potential vulnerabilities for the two regimes. First, the regimes must stretch their communications resources to accommodate diverse audiences across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Thus far, both China and Russia arguably have relatively stronger capabilities in targeting diasporic audiences than global, non-diasporic ones, especially when it comes to persuasion. Second, the targeting of global and domestic publics can result in tensions in messaging, whereby external narratives must consider domestic nationalistic leanings. China's assertive diplomatic communications, for instance, often

⁶ See: <https://www.voanews.com/a/foreign-media-face-unprecedented-hurdles-in-china-/6431553.html>

⁷ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-duma-passes-law-retaliation-against-foreign-media-2022-06-30/>

alienate global audiences while galvanizing domestic publics. Finally, there are some potential frictions in the regimes' conceptions of global audiences. Whereas China and Russia both claim to speak to (and at times "for") the Global South, they prioritize communicating to (and against) the West. This also means that there is significant room for the US government to compete on narratives when it comes to vast audiences in the Global South.

Section III: Governance: Institutional Actors in Strategic Communications Efforts

The governance of strategic communications is more institutionalized in the case of China and more personalistic in the case of Russia, reflecting the core distinctions in the two countries' political systems. While both are authoritarian, with strong government oversight over external communication channels, this oversight is managed in China by several party and state institutions, while in Russia there is significant power relegated to individuals in Putin's inner circle.

The responsibility for guiding China's external communications is divided between the leading party organ, the Propaganda Department, and a leading state institution, the State Council. Specifically, the External Information Bureau, which sits directly under the Propaganda Department, and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) handle official communications directed at external audiences. Routine instructions to state media on what to write and how to cover certain stories come from the External Information Bureau, whereas press conferences with international media are handled by the SCIO (Wang 2022).

Occasionally, the two institutions send mixed signals to Chinese media. The Propaganda Department is more concerned with domestic stability and tends to be more restrictive of information flows, whereas the SCIO is more concerned with publicity and getting information out (Wang 2022). The leaders of state-owned media outlets must discern between these mixed signals and routinely revise their editorial decisions.

In addition to these two organs, the Foreign Ministry has played an increasingly active role in external communications in recent years, at times overpowering the Propaganda Department. Spokespeople for the Foreign Ministry are now actively communicating China's foreign policy agenda on social media platforms like Twitter, and the Foreign

Ministry has become more involved in managing the foreign bureaus of Chinese state media (a mission that was previously primarily under the Propaganda Department). Granting more power to the Foreign Ministry over the management of China's international media bureaus is part of a larger effort to foster more coordinated communication on core issues, like the coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (Wang 2022).

Beyond the institutions in charge of media and communication, China's Ministry of Culture and Education manages cultural and education exchanges, while the Department of Finance and Administrative Affairs handles funding for elite training programs and exchanges. In some cases like Ethiopia (based on my fieldwork research), I found that MOFA officials within the embassy even process the interviews with potential trainees. In the sphere of culture and education, there has been in recent years an emergence of non-state or semi-state actors, such as the Chinese International Education Foundation, in charge of managing the Confucius Institutes since 2020. Individual Chinese universities are also actively engaged in promoting their programs, especially in the Global South, and recruiting international students.

The United Front Work Department, part of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, handles relationships and communications outreach with overseas Chinese nationals, as well as with ethnic minorities, religious organizations, and non-CCP party members within China. The scope of work and responsibilities of this Department have increased under Xi Jinping. This past July, Xi emphasized the importance of wider outreach to the Chinese diasporic population across religious and societal contexts, as part of the United Front mission (State Council of the PRC 2022). Xi's vision for United Front work was reflected in recent events, including the intimidation of pro-Hong Kong protesters in the UK (Quinn 2019), as well as the promotion of pro-China narratives and suppression of any anti-China agenda on Western university campuses (Saul, 2017). As part of the United Front work, Chinese Student and Scholars Associations on university campuses have also come under increasing Chinese government pressure, including co-optation through funding and employment opportunities, and coercion through threats of punishment for non-patriotic behavior while based overseas.⁸

⁸ See for instance: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/fifth-column-fears-the-chinese-influence-campaign-in-the-united-states/>.

In the case of Russia, governance over external communications is less institutionalized, and much of the influence is concentrated within Putin's inner circle. For example, Alexey Gromov, the first deputy of the Presidential Administration and a close ally of Putin, is known for personally guiding the operations of Russia's major international broadcasters, such as RT. A reputable Russian investigative media outlet, *Proekt*, has described Gromov, in its long-form investigation into his work, as the "master of puppets," referring to his coordination over Russian media outlets (The Proekt Team 2019). According to official sources interviewed for this report, Gromov personally convenes meetings with representatives of Russia's major news outlets and key government agencies, including the Foreign Ministry. In these meetings, Gromov gives directives on how important stories should be covered and coordinates strategic communications on sensitive issues, like the recent sanctions imposed on RT by the West (The Proekt Team 2019).

Sergey Kiriyyenko, the first deputy of the head of the Presidential Administration, is another influential figure in Russia's strategic communications. Though historically he was in charge of internal politics, including control over social media, most recently during the war in Ukraine, he was endowed with the role of constructing Russia's "new image" after the war, for both internal and external audiences (Pertsev 2022).

Maria Zakharova, the Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is one of Russia's most influential external communicators. She has personified Russian Foreign Ministry communication by delivering theatrical and often provocative briefings that attract millions of views on social media (Benyumov and Tamkin 2018). Zakharova has also set the tone for Foreign Ministry communication on social media, especially its reliance on satire as a way of fending off Western criticisms.

Russia's communications and cultural relations with "compatriots" are more institutionalized, though there is still significant power wielded by the leaders of these institutions. The Department of the Presidential Administration on Cross-Regional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, launched in 2005, oversees all former USSR countries and "independent" unrecognized republics, including South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria. A recent in-depth investigation by *Dossier*, a non-governmental investigative project launched and sponsored by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, uncovered that this Department has engaged in election interference

campaigns in neighboring countries, including Georgia. It further revealed that the top leadership of this department, including former director and vice-director, are former Russian intelligence officers (Dossier 2020a).

The Russkiy Mir Foundation, noted earlier, is a state-funded organization responsible for spreading Russian history, language, and culture. As of 2020, there were 119 “Russian centers” associated with this foundation, including 28 centers in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, 53 centers in Europe, 26 in Asia, 7 in America, and 5 in Russia—many of them based at local universities, like with Chinese Confucius Institutes (Russkii Mir Annual Report 2020). The head of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Vyacheslav Nikonov, is a pro-Kremlin figure, a grandson of Molotov, and a Duma MP. He was personally appointed to the role at the foundation by Putin. Rossotrudnichestvo, federal-level agency responsible for supporting “compatriots” abroad and maintaining Russia’s influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is headed by Evgenii Primakov, the grandson of the former Prime Minister, Evgenii Primakov. According to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, as of 2021, there were 97 Rossotrudnichestvo offices in 80 countries, and 73 centers for Russian science and technology in 62 countries (Volkov 2021).

Russia’s offensive cyber operations, including cyberattacks and trolling aimed at both Western and CIS countries, are carried out by a mix of state security actors, including the FSB (the Federal Security Service), the GRU (the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), the SVR (the Foreign Intelligence Service), as well as state-affiliated private actors, such as the Internet Research Agency—the troll factory in Saint Petersburg. All these agencies often co-opt private actors, known as “patriotic hackers,” as well as cyber criminals and human trolls to carry out hacking and trolling activities (Hakala and Melnychuk 2021). According to Western researchers, cyber activities by the Russian state are less hierarchical than in the Soviet era, and individual actors are granted significant agency to carry out the regime’s objectives (Hakala and Melnychuk 2021).

This section introduced the core institutions and individual actors charged with strategic communications in China and Russia. The key distinction in strategic communications governance between the two countries is the higher level of institutionalization in China versus the more personalistic communication management in Russia. This personalistic

style makes the tracking of and anticipating of strategic communications shifts in Russia more complicated and less predictable than in China.

Section IV: Operations: The Evolving Strategic Communications Toolkit

The capabilities of China and Russia’s strategic communications toolkit include propaganda and counter-propaganda via their state-owned media outlets, as well as foreign ministry spokespeople, foreign outlets, and journalists; disinformation campaigns; and in the case of China, increasing dominance over global communication infrastructure markets. This strategic communications toolkit reflects the strategic communications objectives introduced in the first section, namely the combination of soft persuasion and assertive competition for narratives, including information warfare in the case of Russia.

Expanding Propaganda via State-Owned Media

Over the past two decades, Russian and Chinese global media outlets have gone through significant regional expansion, localization, and digitalization—the processes that have reinforced their reach across global contexts. As for regional expansion, China’s main broadcaster, *CGTN*, has three major international bureau hubs in Washington, London, and Nairobi and broadcasts in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian. *Xinhua News Agency* has over 101 international bureaus globally, and the English-language official print publication *China Daily* is distributed (for free) across newsstands in the West, as well as hotel lobbies and official government buildings in the Global South.

Russia’s main broadcaster, *RT*, until recently had regional bureaus in Washington, DC, and in major Western capitals, but they were shut down in 2022. It still has bureaus in Cairo and Bishkek. It broadcasts in English, Spanish, Arabic, German, and French. *Sputnik Radio and News Agency*—another major state-sponsored media outlet launched in 2014—has major bureaus in Moscow, Washington, and Berlin, amongst other cities, and its web broadcasting is available in 32 languages.

Both Chinese and Russian global media outlets have deliberately deployed localization in production and distribution as part of their outreach strategy. In the case of Chinese media, localization of production means hiring local journalists, primarily for reporting roles, while keeping editorial and managerial positions with Chinese staff. The journalists at Chinese state media foreign bureaus are largely made up of local talent, and in some cases like Africa, local journalists are granted resources and some (albeit limited) autonomy in carrying out independent reporting that would otherwise be limited in local outlets or even Western news outlets (Gagliardone 2013). Russian broadcasters, especially RT, have arguably embraced strategic production localization on a deeper level by not only hiring local journalists but also attracting well-known Western personalities to host their own shows on the program, including: the head of Wikileaks, Julian Assange; Scotland's former Prime Minister, Alex Sander; and former CNN host Larry King. In fact, Chinese scholars of external propaganda have widely written about RT's localization efforts, finding them inspirational for China's global media outlets (Feng and Liu 2020; Guo 2022).

Localization in content production is paralleled by that in content distribution. Chinese state media outlets like *China Daily* have set up content sharing agreements with at least thirty international newspapers to carry its paid insert, *China Watch* (Lim & Bergin 2018). In its digital format, *China Watch* blends with the content of the news outlet, potentially deceiving the readers to believe that it is an organic part of the publication (Cook 2020). Content distribution agreements are often signed as part of China's major regional forums, such as that between China and Latin America, when a high-level media partnership agreement was followed by a *China Daily* insert being placed into major Argentinian newspapers (Geall and Soutar 2018). Content distribution agreements are also prominent in China's state media outreach to diasporic audiences. According to an investigation by the *Financial Times*, "at least 200 nominally independent Chinese-language publications around the world" have been reprinting or broadcasting some content from China's official news outlets (Feng 2018). The largest number of content production agreements, including with international and Chinese language outlets, has been signed with the United States (over 35), followed by Thailand, Canada, and Indonesia.⁹

⁹ See:

[http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=27&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191%2C167%2C17%2C23%2C5%2C195%2C25%2C11%](http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=27&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191%2C167%2C17%2C23%2C5%2C195%2C25%2C11%2C12%2C13%2C14%2C15%2C16%2C18%2C19%2C20%2C21%2C22%2C24%2C26%2C27%2C28%2C29%2C30%2C31%2C32%2C33%2C34%2C35%2C36%2C37%2C38%2C39%2C40%2C41%2C42%2C43%2C44%2C45%2C46%2C47%2C48%2C49%2C50%2C51%2C52%2C53%2C54%2C55%2C56%2C57%2C58%2C59%2C60%2C61%2C62%2C63%2C64%2C65%2C66%2C67%2C68%2C69%2C70%2C71%2C72%2C73%2C74%2C75%2C76%2C77%2C78%2C79%2C80%2C81%2C82%2C83%2C84%2C85%2C86%2C87%2C88%2C89%2C90%2C91%2C92%2C93%2C94%2C95%2C96%2C97%2C98%2C99%2C100)

Major Russian media outlets with an international presence have also signed content distribution agreements to expand their reach. RT, for instance, broadcasts across Latin America and the Caribbean via agreements with local channels, as well as through cable providers (Gurganus 2018). As with China, some of these agreements appear to be struck following high-level official meetings. *Russia Beyond*, similarly to *China Daily*, is distributed as a paid insert (a monthly supplement) in major international newspapers. According to the former editor of *Russia Beyond*, as of 2013, it was carried by 28 newspapers across 22 countries and included influential media outlets like the Washington Post and the Daily Telegraph (Abov 2013).

Finally, Chinese and Russian international media outlets have expanded their reach via global digital platforms. Chinese outlets, as part of the official policy on “media convergence” directed at both domestic and global media outlets to sync traditional and digital media production (The State Council 2020), have significantly increased their followings on Western digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. According to an in-depth report by Freedom House, “as of December 2019, CGTN’s English account had 90 million followers—the largest of any media outlet on Facebook...” (Freedom House 2020). The report further found that four out of the five fastest growing media accounts on Facebook in terms of followers were Chinese state-owned outlets.

Russian major international broadcasters have also focused on digital platforms since 2017. As of March 2022, Simonyan claimed that RT’s YouTube had almost seven million subscribers. The sanctions on both *RT* and *Sputnik* have heavily influenced their social media reach in the West. RT, however, still has 11 million followers on the Chinese social media network Weibo and 17 million followers on the RT’s Spanish Facebook page, with especially large numbers of followers in Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela (Marques 2022). As with online followers of Chinese state media accounts, it is challenging to distinguish real engagement from fake and superficial engagement on these platforms.

The digital outreach of state-owned news outlets is complemented by an expansion of cyber diplomacy through Chinese and Russian diplomats. Between 2018 and 2022,

[2C14%2C68%2C13%2C63%2C157%2C61%2C22%2C2%2C144%2C83%2C58%2C41&geography_type=cou
ntry&max_year=2021&min_year=1999&per_capita_type=absolute&selected_view=bar&tech_assist_types=39
%2C40%2C41%2C42](#)

China launched 301 diplomatic twitter accounts (Huang 2022), in the West and also the Global South, including 57 accounts in Africa and in Latin America. China's Foreign Ministry spokespeople are also increasingly active on Twitter, regularly posting assertive and provocative messaging vis-à-vis the United States. There is an apparent interplay between state media and diplomatic messaging on social media platforms, whereby the two sets of actors frequently retweet one another. At the same time, there are also subtle distinctions, with state outlets like CGTN straddling a more balanced line in its digital communication and China's official spokespeople occasionally posting more subjective and dramatic commentaries. Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also started actively developing its cyber diplomacy, beginning in 2011. As noted earlier, Zakharova, the Director of the Information and Press Department of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has transformed Russia's cyber communications by both personifying it in her routine performative interactions with foreign actors and by changing the style of Foreign Ministry communication to include more humor, satire, and assertiveness.

Official funding for Chinese and Russian global state media outlets (and cyber diplomacy at large) is difficult to estimate. As noted earlier, in 2009, the Chinese government invested \$6 billion in global communications. Some analysts like Shambaugh have estimated that China is spending \$10 billion a year on soft power, but these numbers require further verification. RT has an annual budget of over \$300 million, according to a recent report published by the Rand Corporation (Paul and Matthews 2016). These numbers have slightly increased in 2022, when the project of the Federal Budget of the Russian Federation distributed about \$350 million to RT (Gosfinansirovani RT i MIA Rossiya Segodnya...2021).

Localization and digitalization in external propaganda have thus far served to amplify the voices and visions of the Chinese and Russian governments internationally. At the same time, these techniques can potentially backfire, especially when it comes to digitalization. Unlike their management of domestic digital platforms, Chinese and Russian governments have limited capability to censor Western digital platforms, including critical reactions of audiences. On Twitter, for instance, China's assertive public diplomacy is often met with reprimand and satire rather than with whole-hearted acceptance. The openness of Western internet platforms and the media environment at large, therefore, can both empower Russia and Chinese propaganda and curtail its influence, by presenting a channel for public pushback and critique.

Propaganda via Foreign Outlets and Journalists

Another important, more subversive tool in the strategic communications arsenals of China and Russia is the delegation of propaganda to foreign outlets and journalists. The discussion of state-owned outlets already noted the practice of placing paid media inserts into international media and hiring local journalists. In addition to these practices, the Chinese and Russian governments (and media outlets affiliated with those governments) have purchased and financially supported foreign media, as well as carried out intensive relationship-building programs with foreign journalists.

As for investment in foreign media, the Chinese government has expanded its propaganda strategy from “borrowing foreign boats” to “buying the boat” (Brady 2015). In South Africa, Chinese state media bought a 20 percent share in Independent Media, the nation’s largest media group (Lim and Bergin 2018). In Mexico, China’s *Phoenix TV* purchased a radio station near the US border (Cook 2020). In Hungary, China’s nationalistic *Global Times* outlet purchased stakes in radio stations (Cook 2020). China’s state-run China Radio International (CRI) has purchased controlling shares in at least 33 radio stations around the world, including WCRW in Washington, DC (Paul 2022). The Russian government has selectively sponsored some foreign outlets, though the exact nature of the financial deals is unclear. A report by the European Institute for Security Studies, for instance, notes that Russia sponsors Serbian nationalist outlets but doesn’t specify the details of these arrangements. Russian state media, however, can broadcast directly into many neighboring countries, making it easier to infiltrate the information space.

Cultivating favorable foreign voices is also done through journalist capacity-building programs. The Chinese government has launched extensive journalist training programs in the past two decades. The China-Africa Press Center fellowship, for instance, was implemented in 2014 and brings on average one thousand African journalists each year to China for a ten-month training, including internships in Chinese state media outlets, lectures about China’s accomplishments, and tours of Chinese infrastructure and cultural sights. This program has recently expanded to include journalists from Southeast Asian countries. There are no formal expectations for journalists participating in this program, but they are encouraged to write articles in their domestic news outlets about their experiences in China. From my interviews with Ethiopian participants, I found that they

tend to produce positive stories about their trips and about China more broadly. In addition to these institutionalized training, the Chinese government has convened large-scale forums with foreign journalists as part of promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (Cook 2020). In Russia, the journalist training programs are run by the state-owned broadcasters themselves, including by RT and Sputnik. Their projects appear to focus on attracting journalists from “near abroad,” but this year, RT announced that it has also conducted an educational seminar for journalists from Nicaragua (Telegram Simonyan 2020). There is little systematic information available on how extensive these training sessions are in the Russian context. Overall, China has more aggressively pursued both the delegation of propaganda via investment in foreign outlets and the building of positive relationships with international journalists to shape their future coverage of China.

Coercive Strategies: Cyber Disinformation

When it comes to more coercive strategies, Russia has thus far embraced them on a larger scale and with higher sophistication than China. Research on *RT's* America programming found that its flagship shows regularly deployed conspiratorial framing in their coverage (Yablokov 2015). The conspiracies presented primarily concerned the actions of the US government, with the main objective being to escalate existing public mistrust towards US government institutions (Yablokov 2015).

Studies of Russian disinformation campaigns online, especially those carried out by Russia's Internet Research Agency, further uncover expansive and sophisticated disinformation capabilities. Analyses of Russia's meddling in the 2016 US Presidential Election, for instance, revealed the deployment of a dual strategy: identifying and sorting voters into different groups through organic posts and then targeting voters with political ads that match their own interests (Timberg 2017). Studies of Russia's disinformation campaigns against European audiences have found that IRA accounts have built a large following by buying followers, using “follower fishing” (following new accounts for them to reciprocate with a follow), and employing narrative switching, whereby initially mundane discussion topics turn more political over time (Dawson and Innes 2019). A recent study of IRA accounts' disinformation on vaccines in the United States found that their tweets “evoked political identities” and that “this could exacerbate recently emerging partisan gaps relating to vaccine misinformation (Walter

et al. 2020). Adapting communications strategies to specific audiences and tapping into the existing identities are a central tenets of Russia's disinformation campaigns.

Starting in mid-2017, the Chinese government selectively embraced some Russian-style disinformation tactics, but they are largely targeted at Chinese diasporas thus far. In 2018, for instance, the Chinese government orchestrated disinformation campaigns aimed at boosting a pro-Beijing candidate in a mayoral race in Taiwan, and in 2019, Twitter took down 900 accounts associated with the Chinese government that were propagating disinformation about Hong Kong protesters (Cook 2020). Following the pandemic and the intensified competition for narratives between China and the United States, China's Foreign Ministry spokespeople have also engaged in disinformation about the origins of the virus, and thousands of suspicious pro-China Twitter accounts have emerged that bolstered the pro-CCP position (Zhong et. al. 2021). China's disinformation campaigns are not yet as extensive as Russia's and are less capable of penetrating, mimicking, and exacerbating societal sentiments and divisions. China is learning fast, however, and its evolving capabilities in disinformation should be watched closely. A recent study by the Oxford Internet Institute, for instance, uncovered the deployment of a "coordinated amplification network" by Chinese diplomats in the United Kingdom, whereby 62 inauthentic accounts were created on Twitter to promote the postings of the Chinese ambassador and the Chinese embassy in the UK.¹⁰

Expansion in Global Communications Infrastructure

Finally, it is important to highlight China's expanding communications infrastructure capabilities. As part of its global economic push, China has been selling and developing communications infrastructure on a large scale, especially in the Global South. By June 2021, for instance, the Shenzhen-based manufacturer Transsion dominated the smartphone market in Africa (Olander 2021). StarTimes, a privately owned Chinese company with close ties to the CCP, dominates the digital television infrastructure on the continent (Cooks 2020). China's mega-app WeChat is widely adopted across Asia (Cook 2020). As part of China's Digital Silk Road initiative, Chinese companies are also

¹⁰ See: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/new-study-finds-coordinated-amplification-network-promoting-tweets-by-chinas-diplomats-in-the-uk/>

expanding the provision of other digital infrastructure—including 5G networks, surveillance, and smart city technology—across BRI countries.

This expansion in digital infrastructure provision empowers China's strategic communications capabilities on multiple levels. First, some of this infrastructure carries softer, ideational components. StarTimes' digital television packages, for instance, include Chinese media and entertainment alongside Western and local content. Second, the provision of digital infrastructure in the Global South directly feeds into China's projected image as a "responsible major power," sharing its technological prowess with other developing countries. Finally, expanding its digital footprint allows China to set standards in digital infrastructure, challenging the dominance of the United States.

This section introduced the evolving strategic communications toolkit deployed by China and Russia, ranging from increasingly localized and digitized propaganda via state media and the delegation of propaganda messaging to foreign journalists and local news outlets, to engagement in cyber disinformation strategies and the expansion of global communication infrastructure. Whereas Russia is more sophisticated in its deployment of coercive disinformation techniques, China has been more proactive in expanding its digital infrastructure footprint, such that it can present significant challenges to the US government in the long run.

Section V: Alliances and Convergences

As already noted in the section on strategic objectives, both China and Russia aspire to rebalance the world order to diminish the influence of the West (and especially of the United States). Both political regimes perceive the West as deliberately antagonizing their legitimacy externally and domestically. Both regimes attribute significant power to Western media and cultural communication channels in shaping public perceptions of global publics, including within China and Russia. The strategic communications goals of China and Russia, therefore, align in competing with and pushing back on Western narratives, Western media, and cultural influence more broadly. At the same time, there is an important distinction in how the two regimes engage in this competition. China promotes itself as an aspirational alternative to the West and defends itself against perceived Western accusations. Russia, on the other hand, does not attempt to sell a

distinctly Russian model or vision but rather seeks to uphold and elevate its prominence by weakening the West. This distinction can be categorized as “constructive” versus “destructive” approaches. China attempts to construct a positive image of itself, whereas Russia concentrates its goal primarily on destructing the Western-centric order. At the same time, considering China’s more assertive diplomatic posture in recent years, its constructive stance is often counter-balanced, and arguably deluded with, its increasingly antagonistic rhetoric, especially as expressed by China’s official spokespeople.

At the operational level, the strategic communications of China and Russia occasionally reinforce each other but for the most part generally operate in isolation. When it comes to mutual reinforcement, propaganda messaging aimed at illuminating the real and manufactured weaknesses in, as well as at spreading conspiracies about, Western governance is increasingly overlapping between the two countries. The messaging about Russia’s war in Ukraine is an apt illustration of this overlap, whereby both China and Russia have framed the West and NATO as the culprits behind the escalation of this conflict and have pushed back on US critiques of Russia’s actions by questioning the US’s moral legitimacy. In my analysis of China’s official and social media narratives on the war in Ukraine, I find that much of the seemingly pro-Russian discourse is rooted in deep anti-Western sentiments (Repnikova 2022). During this conflict, Chinese official spokespeople have also spread Russian conspiracy theories, including those about US biological weapons stored in Ukraine (Repnikova 2022). Beyond the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, China has recently embraced more conspiratorial, Russian-style rhetoric vis-à-vis the United States and more disinformation strategies, including false narratives about the origins of Covid-19. Some convergence in communication tactics is also aimed at mutual domestic audiences. As part of their strengthening bilateral relationship, Chinese state media practitioners tend to stick to positive coverage of Russia, and Russian media largely presents China in a positive way, based on my analysis and observations.

While the areas of convergence in Chinese and Russian communication tactics should be closely observed, it is also important not to overstate the extent of convergence. Thus far, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that China and Russia bolster each other’s propaganda agendas on the international stage, beyond that of occasionally diffusing similar negative narratives about the West. For example, Russian state media

does not appear to endorse China's policies towards Taiwan or its public diplomacy efforts in the Global South; for their part, Chinese state media communicates ambivalent commentaries on Ukraine and does not diffuse Russia's critiques of the West as corrupting traditional and spiritual values. For the most part, the communication efforts of China and Russia on the global stage proceed in parallel or in isolation to one another.

This section emphasized the increasing convergence in strategic communications by China and Russia when it comes to rebuking Western narratives. At the same time, there are also important areas of divergence. First, China still aspires to "telling its story" and promoting its image, whereas Russia mainly focuses on the destructive elements of strategic communications vis-à-vis the West. Second, when it comes to major international crises faced by the two nations, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, there are limited expressions of discursive support for one another, as evident in China's ambivalent public stance about the war.

Section VI: Environment: Public Support for Russia's Strategic Communications

Estimating political and popular support for Chinese and Russian strategic communications domestically is challenging, considering the opacity of the two regimes. Some of the external communications carried out by state media and diplomats are not accessible to domestic publics. At the same time, there are some indicators of popular support for official policies and practices or, at the very least, some convergence in public and official aspirations.

In the case of China, two recent public opinion surveys indicate that Chinese citizens consider China's global image to be increasingly positive. The 2021 Carter Center survey found that the majority of respondents believe that China is viewed either very favorably or favorably by the international community (U.S.-China Perception Monitor 2021). The 2020 Global Times survey revealed that 78 percent of respondents believe China's image has improved in recent years, and that 70 percent of respondents support "wolf warrior diplomacy" tactics (Wang Qi 2020). These findings indicate that domestically, there is an appreciation for China's strategic communications efforts,

especially the more assertive communication style embraced by Chinese diplomats on Twitter.

In the case of Russia, there are no recent polls specifically targeting public perceptions of Russia's image. A recent poll about public expectations of Russia's position in international politics, however, indicates that 47 percent of respondents anticipated an improvement and 31 percent expected Russia's stance to remain unchanged (VTSIOM 2022). Recent public opinion polls about trust in political institutions, including trust in Vladimir Putin, further showcase persisting public support despite the ongoing events in Ukraine (Levada 2022). Given that the majority of Russians still get their news from state-controlled television, these attitudes are unlikely to change in the short-term future, and we are likely to see at least implicit public support for Russia's strategic communications practices.

Overall, the domestic public opinion environment is largely positive when it comes to official strategic communications by both Chinese and Russian governments.

Section VII: Results: Varied Reception Across Strategic Audiences

Considering the broad nature of Chinese and Russian strategic communications objectives discussed in section one, it is challenging to definitively state whether they appear to have fulfilled these objectives. In both cases, there are no transparent criteria for success that can be used to evaluate results over time. I discuss the varied responses of the target audiences below.

Starting with diasporic audiences, there is no reliable survey data that captures the variation in public sentiment towards the Chinese and Russian regimes. Recent studies on China's influence operations towards diasporic groups indicate the CCP is increasingly effective at mobilizing diaspora communities via the WeChat app, especially during crisis moments like the Covid-19 pandemic (Ceccagno and Thuno 2022). It also appears to be relatively successful at shaping the narratives of Chinese diasporic media outlets in favor of the CCP (Sun and Sinclair 2016).

Russia's diasporic outreach has yielded mixed results. On the one hand, about one million compatriots have relocated to Russia since the launch of the "near abroad" program (Laurelle 2021). At the same time, Russia's diasporic outreach has not necessarily succeeded in creating strong affective bonds with Russia. Many Russian diaspora communities, such as those in the Baltic states, maintain a connection to Russian language and culture but do not consider Russia to be their homeland (Coolican 2021). The Russian government also often *speaks for* rather than *with* the diaspora, as evident in the current crisis in Ukraine.

As for external responses to Chinese and Russian strategic communications, the results are mixed in both cases. China's strategic communications towards major industrialized democracies has not yielded a more positive image of itself. The latest public opinion surveys on China's favorability across 19 nations, most of them liberal democracies, find that "negative views of China remain at or near historic highs" (Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022). In the Asia-Pacific region, China's favorability has also declined, as more Asian countries are favoring the United States (Saransomrurtai and Reinhart 2022).

In the Global South, especially Africa but also parts of Latin America, China's outreach appears to have been more successful. The 2021 Afrobarometer surveys reveal that Africans tend to hold generally positive views about Chinese influence (Sheehy and Asunka 2021). A 2021 Pew Survey in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina found that nearly half of the respondents held favorable views of China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2021). These successes, however, might be explained more by China's economic influence in these regions as opposed to its effective strategic communications outreach. Studies on perceptions of Chinese media amongst African journalists and elites, for instance, found that they rarely access Chinese media sources (Wasserman 2012). In Latin America, scholars find that China's Spanish-language television channel also faces limited recognition and credibility (Morales 2018).

Russia's image has long been unfavorable in major Western democracies. According to a 2020 Pew Research survey, views of Russia remained negative across 14 industrialized democracies included in the survey (Huang 2020). In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's ratings have further dropped, including in countries that prior to the war held moderately favorable views towards Russia, such as South Korea (Wike et al. 2022). In Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, views of Russia are

mixed. In Central Asia, for instance, a 2020 survey of young people found that many looked at Russia favorably, as both an ally and as an education destination (Kabarchuk & Poplavskaya 2019). Yet, in the Baltics, especially following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the majority of citizens see Russia as a major threat (Clem and Herron 2022).

Though surveys on perceptions of Russia in the Global South are limited, some studies indicate a relatively higher approval for Russia in Africa (median approval of 41 percent), but approval has been declining over the past decade (Bikus 2022).

Considering that Russia's underlying aim is to disrupt the Western image rather than to promote Russia's global vision, we should be cautious in interpreting these ratings as a failure for Russia's strategic communication. Russia's anti-Western rhetoric, for instance, has resonated in many parts of the Global South, as illustrated in the context of the war in Ukraine and the unwillingness of many nations to condemn Russia's actions, instead attributing responsibility to the West (Tucker 2022). Beyond the current conflict, there is ample evidence that Russia's disinformation campaigns, such as those carried out during the 2016 election, were influential in shaping perceptions of political issues as well as voting behaviors (Jamieson 2018).

Overall, it is challenging to definitively determine the success of Chinese and Russian strategic communications. Their initiatives appear to have relatively more impact with diasporic audiences and with target publics in the Global South. At the same time, when it comes to the disruptive capabilities of strategic communications, Russia has been relatively successful in its disinformation campaigns in the West.

Section VIII: Conclusions and Implications for US Strategic Interests

This paper presented an in-depth comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian official strategic communications visions and practices. The analysis underscored some important similarities and distinctions in how the two regimes envision and implement strategic communications. Starting with similarities in visions, both regimes are heavily motivated by maintaining and strengthening their domestic legitimacy through effective strategic communications. This means that external communication is always rooted in the core objective of appealing to domestic audiences. As part of the increasingly

nationalistic stance of the two regimes (including their domestic publics), the Chinese and Russian governments tend to construct their communication agenda in response to the West (and especially the United States), which they see as a major threat to their strategic interests externally and domestically. Both countries frequently rely on assertive communications that target the United States; yet, though Russia has built its entire strategy around this, for China, it is only part of its communication vision and arsenal. Anti-Western communication is aimed as much at directly competing with the West as it is at defending domestic audiences from potentially harmful Western narratives about China and Russia.

In terms of tactical similarities, both China and Russia increasingly engage in strategic communications that take advantage of local media professionals, distribution networks, and news outlets, as well as Western digital platforms. These more indirect and subtle forms of persuasion are important to track, as they are likely to expand and intensify in the future. What may present a threat to the US long-term strategic interests is less the *type* of message communicated and more how it is communicated and delivered .

At the same time, some important distinctions exist in how China and Russia communicate. First, in terms of strategic vision, Russia is more focused on disruption of the status quo, whereas China still aspires to gain legitimacy and recognition by global publics, despite embracing more assertive narratives and communications techniques in recent years. Second, in terms of tactical differences, Russia has been more invested in cyber disinformation strategies and toolkits, whereas China has invested heavily in more tools for co-opting actors, such as training media professionals and expanding digital communications infrastructure in the Global South.

The analysis of Chinese and Russian strategic communications in this paper presents some potential lessons for US public diplomacy, especially when it comes to competing with China and Russia.

First, the United States has an opportunity to compete for Chinese and Russian diasporic publics in the US and globally by investing more heavily in outreach to local media outlets and community organizers. Part of the reliance on Chinese official funding by Chinese language diasporic outlets, for instance, is rooted in their limited resources rather than in strong affinities for the Chinese Communist Party. Support for diasporic media and their integration into the mainstream media environment in the United

States could help dissuade them from close engagements with China. Outreach to diasporic communities can also be expanded to other regions strategic to both China and Russia, such as Southeast Asia in the case of China and Eastern (and Central) Europe in the case of Russia. This can be carried out through educational and media training forums led by American NGOs, amongst other outreach tactics.

Second, the US should take advantage of the mixed reception towards China and Russia in the Global South by investing more in public diplomacy there, including in journalist training, foreign correspondents, and cyber diplomacy. One area of particularly vital need is investment in civil society and journalism training in Global South countries that would better equip local leaders and community groups to manage China's increasing presence. In my research in Ethiopia, I found that the grasp of Chinese political and economic influence amongst local media and civil society professionals was quite limited and more educational training could strengthen their negotiation abilities vis-à-vis China.

Third, the US (and particularly US companies) should be more deliberate about competing for communications infrastructure contracts in the Global South. While Chinese companies tend to win most of the contracts, American companies have been competitive in some contexts. For instance, in 2021, a U.S.-backed consortium won a multibillion-dollar contract over a Chinese company to build Ethiopia's 5G-network.¹¹

Fourth, while it might be tempting to treat China and Russia as an "information nexus," US policymakers should pay close attention to the distinctions in their visions and strategies. For instance, rather than solely underscoring China's rhetorical support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, it would be strategically beneficial to also highlight China's ambivalent rhetoric about the war, including its lack of direct endorsement of the conflict. Publicly demonstrating and acknowledging divisions between China and Russia helps raise questions about the extent of their alliance and exposes their distinct geopolitical agendas. Considering that China is still more invested in promoting a positive image of itself than Russia, the US government could also play into China's obsession with soft power by encouraging the Chinese government to live up to its global governance ambitions, including by improving its environmental standards as

¹¹ See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-china-tech-fight-opens-new-front-in-ethiopia-11621695273>

part of the Belt and Road initiative and by increasing the transparency of its global infrastructure projects.

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Background Research Gates Forum I

Autocratic Approaches to Information Manipulation: A Comparative Case Study

How Putin and Xi use technology to advance strategic communications and what the United States must do to push back

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The United States and other liberal democratic societies are engaged in a persistent, asymmetric competition with authoritarian challengers that is taking place far from traditional military battlefields, including within the information domain. In an increasingly crowded playing field, Russia and China stand out as uniquely capable competitors.

As part of their respective efforts to weaken competitors abroad and shore up their power at home, both Russia and China amplify information that is false or misleading in order to suit their geopolitical interests. Russia frequently engages in deceptive practices like misrepresenting the origin of content, often to deepen polarization within a target society. Both deploy whataboutism and traffic in multiple, often contradictory conspiracy theories to deflect blame for their misdeeds and criticism of their illiberal practices. Both Russia and China invest large sums in propaganda apparatuses that churn out vast quantities of digital content that project their preferred, often distorted narratives about geopolitical topics. And both, to varying degrees, censor content within their borders. Beijing's Great Firewall prevents its citizens from accessing Western information platforms, including Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and content deemed objectionable by the Chinese government. Meanwhile, its suffocating digital surveillance architecture represses citizen speech (Mozur et al., 2022). Russia has maintained a somewhat more open information environment—YouTube, for example, remains a valuable source of non-government news—but that has been rapidly changing in the aftermath of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine ("Kremlin Pushes," 2022). China in particular works to dominate digital distribution channels—the "pipes" through which information is spread—in Chinese-language environments and to co-opt independent media abroad (Rosenberger and Garnaut, 2018).

Information may be the most consequential terrain over which states will compete in the coming decades. But democratic governments have been slow to recognize this challenge and to adjust their strategic communications capabilities and practices to meet the moment (Linking Values and Strategy, 2020). Fortunately, there are signs that this is beginning to change. Take, for example, the novel campaign undertaken by the United States and its partners to declassify and expose information about Russia's plans to carry out a false flag operation in Ukraine ahead of its invasion in February 2022. In the weeks leading up to that event, Washington and London revealed that Moscow intended to create a graphic video using dead bodies, staged Ukrainian military

equipment, and actors posing as Russian-speaking mourners that would create a pretext for intervention; that it pre-positioned operatives trained in urban warfare to stage a false-flag incident in eastern Ukraine, for the same reason; and that it had developed plans to install a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine and had gone as far as to have selected a candidate (Borger et al., 2022; Sanger, 2022; Schwirtz et al., 2022). This campaign of intelligence exposures did not deter Putin from invading Ukraine—that likely wasn't possible. But it did make it harder for him to justify his action with lies. It bound allies together, made it harder for reluctant partners to sit on the sidelines, and built public support for a stiffer response among publics in the United States and Europe. In so doing, it may have bested Putin at his own game (Brandt, 2022b).

To succeed in this competition, the United States and other democratic governments should resist the urge to respond in kind to autocratic information manipulation campaigns, recognizing that by doing so they ultimately do more harm to themselves than their competitors. Instead, they should reframe the competition on their own terms and go on offense in the places most conducive to their success (Brandt, 2021b). Within the information domain, this will require harnessing truthful information to defend U.S. and democratic interests with concerted campaigns highlighting the failures of autocratic rule (Rosenberger & Gorman, 2020). Tactically, this should include resisting the urge to respond to whataboutism with detailed rebuttals, as doing so prolongs a conversation on the competitor's terms. For Washington, such a strategy should include improving content-sharing mechanisms, like the State Department's Content Commons, that allow for approved digital content to be shared across government agencies. And it should entail expanding U.S. public diplomacy resources devoted to Latin America, where Russian state-backed content receives wide engagement. Competitive success will also require Washington and other democratic governments to defend freedom of information worldwide, recognizing that doing so is not just the right thing to do, but that it presses on a vulnerability of illiberal leaders. And it could also include support for open, independent media—including in closed spaces. Ultimately, to navigate the information contest with autocrats toward favorable outcomes, U.S. policymakers will need to take action beyond the information domain and push back on Russian and Chinese information manipulation activities through other means. This could include using U.S. cyber capabilities, within the appropriate authorities, to undermine the ability of Moscow and Beijing to conduct information operations that undermine U.S. interests. And it could entail sanctioning those who carry out information operations, while

working with allies and partners to exchange best practices and coordinate efforts (Linking Values and Strategy, 2020).

This paper provides a comparative case study of how Russia and China use technology to advance strategic communications and public diplomacy that impacts U.S. interests. Part one focuses on the evolving tools, tactics, and practices of autocratic regimes that are relevant to American policymakers. Part two highlights the primary narratives that each regime—and at times, both regimes together—hammers on a consistent basis and that have the potential to shape the information environment in which U.S. policy is conducted. Finally, part three aims to provide policy recommendations for U.S. leaders, primarily in government but also in the private and civil society sectors, for pushing back on Russia and China’s information advances.

Understanding the Autocrat’s Information Manipulation Toolkit: Tactics, Techniques, and Practices

Using a variety of low-cost, often deniable tools and tactics, both Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China carry out manipulative campaigns within the information domain to advance their respective objectives in the broader geopolitical competition with the United States and other liberal democracies. Both Moscow and Beijing exploit search results to surface their preferred narratives on platforms that are widely viewed as neutral conduits of information in order to shape public views on topics salient to their interests, such as the crisis in Ukraine and the human rights situation in Xinjiang. Both deploy Western influencers as a means of disguising their messaging as authentic advocacy—boosting its resonance within target societies while eschewing culpability. And both traffic in conspiracy theories designed to create the impression that there is no such thing as objective truth, recognizing that belief that the truth is knowable is essential to the principle of self-government that underpins healthy democratic societies. However, Russia and China each also deploy unique tactics that are suited to their respective goals and strengths. For Russia, this includes “perception hacking,” a technique that leverages widespread awareness of Russian interference, and the use of retail influence campaigns, which draw on Russia’s long history of subversion carried out by its intelligence services. China, for its part, manufactures the appearance of consensus,

reflecting the challenge of building support for pro-Beijing content on platforms that it prevents its own citizens from accessing, and co-opts conversations that criticize its rights record, given the importance the Chinese government places on portraying itself as a responsible global leader.

Where Russia and China's Approaches Align

Russia and China use a suite of tools to advance their interests in the information domain. For Russia, a declining power by many measures, these interests include disrupting the partnerships and alliances of competitor states and exacerbating internal political divisions in order to weaken them from within, within the near term. With little to lose and perhaps even something to gain from exposure for its destabilizing activities, the Kremlin has historically been undeterred by attribution and is not particularly concerned with promoting a positive image of Russia. China's interests, meanwhile, include the more expansive goals of reshaping the existing international order and painting a positive portrait of Beijing as a responsible global player with an attractive political system, while deflecting or repressing criticism that runs counter to that portrait (Brandt, 2021a). The objective of this section is not to detail every aspect of Russia and China's respective toolkits, but to highlight evolving trends of interest to U.S. policymakers in and out of government.

Exploiting Search Results

A great deal of attention has been paid to the ways that Putin and Xi have exploited social media to suit their goals—including depressing the appeal of liberal institutions and governments, thereby making it harder for those entities to exercise soft power; stifling criticism of their own illiberal practices in order to normalize or justify those practices; preventing would-be critics from organizing to counter them; and weakening international partnerships and alliances that could be leveraged against their interests. Importantly, both Russia and China have had success in a much less well-understood vector: dominance in search engine results.

The Kremlin has frequently capitalized on search results to disseminate multiple, sometimes contradictory conspiracy theories to deflect blame for a variety of wrongdoings and to undermine the notion that there is such a thing as objective truth. In 2014, for example, when Kremlin-backed operatives in Eastern Ukraine downed

passenger jet MH17, killing all 298 people on board, Russian state media spread multiple false claims discrediting existing evidence and promoting an alternative version of events. For weeks, these claims appeared widely across Russian state-controlled outlets TASS, Sputnik, and RT, in content that regularly surfaced on the front page of Google through its “Top Stories” function (Hanlon, 2018b). Again in 2018, after the poisoning of Russian dissident Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, UK at the hands of the Kremlin, researchers documented a similar phenomenon, where content denying culpability, discrediting extant evidence, and promoting alternative, false theories of events performed well among Google’s “Top Stories” (Hanlon, 2018b).

The phenomenon hasn't abated. In the days surrounding Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, its state-backed propaganda performed surprisingly well on Google News. That week, the Kremlin’s propaganda apparatus returned the top search result on five of seven days for two key terms related to the conflict—“DPR” and “LPR,” abbreviations for the break-away regions in Ukraine’s east, the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic, respectively. Likewise, on the day Putin recognized the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk, four of the top ten search results for “Kiev” (the Russian-rooted spelling of Ukraine’s capital, as opposed to “Kyiv,” the Ukrainian-rooted spelling) on Google News returned Kremlin content, including the first and second search hits (Brandt & Wirtschafter, 2022a). Shortly thereafter, the company announced that it would no longer surface Russian state-backed content on Google News (Dave, 2022).

Importantly, this activity doesn’t just target Europe: researchers have also documented similar findings related to content deflecting blame for Russian-backed President Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2018 (Hanlon, 2018b). During this period, the Kremlin carried out a sustained campaign to discredit the White Helmets, a humanitarian group of Syrian volunteer rescue workers providing protection and recovery assistance for civilians caught up in the violence that shone a light on war crimes committed by the Russian-backed regime (Hanlon, 2018a). The Kremlin’s efforts to cover up the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Douma in April of that year, for example, included allegations that the White Helmets fabricated documentary evidence (“Syria Charity Head Admits,” 2018). These claims also regularly surfaced in search results for “Douma” and “White Helmets” in Google’s “Top Stories” function (Hanlon, 2018b).

China, for its part, has exploited search results to promote its preferred, often distorted narratives around the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and the human rights situation in Xinjiang—two subjects that are particularly geopolitically important to Beijing. On COVID-19, Beijing seeks to deflect criticism for its early mishandling of the pandemic; on Xinjiang, it seeks to evade blame for its treatment of the Uighur minority population in the province. Beijing’s performance on both subjects threaten to undermine the image of China as a responsible global leader that can provide an attractive alternative to the U.S.-led international order and the liberal democratic model (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022).

According to recent research, Chinese state media have consistently been effective at influencing the online content that surfaces in results for searches for the neutral term “Xinjiang.” This was especially the case on Google News, Bing News, and YouTube. In the study, at least one Chinese state-backed news outlet appeared in the top ten results in 88% of news searches. On YouTube, that number was 98%. This finding suggests that it may be remarkably easy for an unsuspecting user to stumble across Chinese state-backed content in search results—even when searching for a neutral term (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022).

Less surprisingly, search results for conspiratorial terms—for example, “Fort Detrick,” a U.S. military base in Maryland that has been the target of Chinese disinformation seeking to cast it as the place COVID-19 originated—also regularly surface a large volume of Beijing-backed propaganda on the first page of search results. According to the same study, roughly half of all YouTube results for the term “Fort Detrick” were produced by Chinese state media. They include videos that raise spurious, leading questions like, “How terrifying is the history of U.S. Fort Detrick lab?” (*U.S. Fort Detrick Lab*, 2021). Exposure to Beijing’s narratives on social media may influence the language a user selects in searches for information, which means an information loop may be at play. Users confront conspiratorial information online, search to investigate, and are met with confirmatory evidence (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022).

These findings may represent a deliberate strategy on the part of Putin and Xi to manipulate the information environment through search engine optimization, or they may reflect a more banal phenomenon: their ability to produce a steady stream of state-backed media content on the narratives of importance to them. Where

authoritative Western media debunk a conspiracy once and move on to other news-worthy topics, Russian and Chinese state media can churn content virtually unconstrained by budgets or audience tastes. This means Russian and Chinese state media can provide what search engines generally aim to surface: fresh, relevant content for a query. Regardless of whether the phenomenon is intentional or not, the outcome is the same: search results are a vector for spreading state-backed narratives to audiences around the world (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022). This is especially important because research consistently shows high levels of public trust in search engines. Users tend to view search platforms as neutral conduits of information and believe that individuals are in control of what they find (*Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, 2021*; Haider & Sundin, 2019).¹

Deploying Western Influencers

Both Russia and China work through Western influencers to evade platform detection techniques and to add a degree of legitimacy and remove a degree of culpability for their messages. Russia, for its part, operates an extensive network of proxy outlets that promote its propagandist narratives. According to the U.S. Department of State, which profiled several of these media properties, one of their core tactics is to run Western fringe thinkers and conspiracy theorists, “giving them a broader platform, while trying to obscure the [publication’s] Russian origins” (*Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation, 2020*). This tactic enables these websites to appear as authentic voices, not least because the individuals they publish communicate in local idioms and understand local audiences well (*Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation, 2020*). As Elise Thomas has argued, “There is now a direct, established pipeline from Russian state media to high profile Western conspiracy influencers, who will promote pro-Kremlin propaganda on their behalf – and at no cost to them” (Thomas, 2022). As Western governments rolled out COVID-19 vaccines around the world, a supposedly UK-based public relations agency with ties to Russia approached French and German bloggers and influencers on YouTube and offered money to tell their followers the falsehood that the Pfizer vaccine was responsible for hundreds of deaths (Henley, 2021).

As recently as 2020, China appeared to lack an influencer network of its own, and largely leveraged those of other illiberal governments—not only Russia, but Venezuela

¹ For a more detailed discussion, see: *Winning the Web*.

and Iran. From May to October of that year, for example, Russia's RT and Venezuela's TeleSur were among the ten media outlets most frequently retweeted by Chinese diplomats that were not owned by Beijing (Brandt & Schafer, 2020). These accounts also regularly boosted the specific Western, talking head figures that featured prominently in that content. "In one particularly salient example," documented at the time, "an American filmmaker routinely amplified by Russian and Iranian state media produced a video for a Russian government-funded digital outlet where he labeled Hong Kong protestors 'fanatics' and part of a U.S.-government regime change operation" (Ambassade de Chine au Tchad [@ambchinetchad], 2019; Brandt & Schafer, 2020). The purpose of this activity is to launder information—making it appear more legitimate by channeling domestic voices within Western societies and placing Beijing at a remove of responsibility for the content.

Two years later, there are signs that China is building up a cohort of influencers of its own. Around the 2022 Winter Olympics, which took place in Beijing and shined a spotlight on China, the Chinese government paid influencers on TikTok and Instagram—including a "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" TV star and a Paralympic swimmer—to carry out an opaque campaign promoting state propaganda. The campaign, which targeted U.S. social media users, reached roughly 4 million users with ads in stories, videos and posts across the two platforms ("China Discreetly Paid," 2022). There is also growing evidence that on YouTube, Beijing uses Western influencers living in China to bat away criticisms of the Chinese government's repressive policies and rights abuses in Xinjiang, and to paint an appealing portrait of life in China. According to government documents, state-run media and local governments have organized and paid for influencers to travel within China, and state media and government officials amplify the pro-Beijing content they produce on major international social media platforms and in Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefings (Mozur et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Because these relationships are not transparent, they can be difficult to detect. As a result, they are likely to elude efforts by the major social media companies to identify and apply content moderation policies to the online activity of governments, including the use of tools like labeling, demonetizing, and downranking state-backed content.

There is also evidence that Beijing in particular uses hosting, reposting, and syndication agreements—where one party provides content for publication and promotion on

another's website—to boost the reach and perceived legitimacy of its state-backed media content. For example, Beijing-backed press agency Xinhua has signed content hosting agreements with international news outlets, including major news aggregators such as MSN (Dotson, 2021). It has inked similar agreements with state news agencies elsewhere around the world, including ANSA in Italy and NAN in Nigeria (Xinhua, 2017; “Xinhua Italian Service,” 2019). These agreements not only facilitate the spread of state media content on the web generally, but specifically within search results, including through news aggregators (Kumar, 2021). Recent research has documented that reposted content frequently features in search results across Google Search, Google News, Bing Search, and Bing News for keywords related to Xinjiang. Over a 120-day period, researchers documented at least 19 different news outlets from 16 different countries that reposted Chinese state-backed content on Xinjiang verbatim and whose content appeared within the top ten results for related queries (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022). One article from the *Helsinki Times*, “Witnessing the real Xinjiang, foreign diplomats debunk lies,” that appeared in top web search results nearly every day of the study, aims to dispute conventional wisdom about what is happening in Xinjiang and to whitewash Beijing's rights record there (Brandt, Schafer, et al., 2022; Xinhua, 2021). Although the *Helsinki Times* does acknowledge its agreement with the People's Daily on its website, with a note that it “does not exercise editorial control over” and “is not responsible for the topics and content” of the section entitled “China News,” it does not label each individual piece of republished content (China News Zone, n.d.). That means users who come directly to a particular article, including through search, are unlikely to have context for what they are encountering. Authoritative outlets should reconsider these agreements and, at a minimum, apply clear labels to each piece of content. Likewise, search engines should apply a label to search results that acknowledges the original source—not just for Chinese state media, but for any state media that do not have independent editorial control (Brandt & Wirtschafter, 2022b).

Trafficking in Conspiracies

Both Moscow and Beijing frequently traffic in outright conspiracies to deflect blame for wrongdoing. The examples are numerous, but the false theory that Ukraine has been developing biological weapons program with the help of the American military—which Russia picked up from the U.S. far-right ecosystem, and that China subsequently amplified, at times more aggressively than Russia itself—is a case in point (Cooper et

al., 2022; Kotsonis & Chakrabarti, 2022). Russian and Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts on Twitter have each mentioned the biological weapons lab conspiracy theory thousands of times since February 24, 2022 (*Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard*, n.d.). On Russia's part, this content has included claims that the "The U.S. seeks to create bioagents for selective ethnic groups," that the January 6 hearings are meant to be a distraction from biological weapons in Ukraine, and that the program entailed "criminal experiments" on Ukrainian citizens, among others (RT en Español [@ActualidadRT], 2022a; Stacy Rae [@stacyhvae], 2022; 駐日ロシア連邦大使館 [@RusEmbassyJ], 2022). Some of this content has taken an explicitly partisan spin, arguing that "Democrats in the U.S. have partnered with Big Pharma companies and friendly foundations led by George Soros and Bill Gates" to raise money for elections; that Joe Biden, when he was Vice President, directly oversaw the program; and that Hunter Biden, the President's son, was centrally involved in funding such a scheme (Ekimenko, 2022; "US Democrats Use Ukraine Biolab Profits for Campaign Funding – Russia," 2022; РИА Новости [@rianru], 2022). Slides released by the Russian Defense Ministry on Telegram likewise aimed to tie the non-existent bioweapons program to the Democratic Party (РИА Новости [@rian_ru], 2022). China, for its part, has promoted suspicion of the purported program, including that it deliberately targeted children (Zhang Meifang 张美芳 [@CGMeifangZhang], 2022). Over several weeks, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian promoted the conspiracy theory in multiple press conferences (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, 2022, 2022, 2022). Often, China used Russian sources in doing so. Citing Russian state media outlet Sputnik News, Chinese state media linked the conspiracy to "bat coronavirus," while Zhao promoted an RT clip to legitimate his assertions on U.S. biolabs, and CGTN amplified the Russian representative to the UN's statements on the subject (Bodnar, Schafer, et al., 2022a; CGTN [@CGTNOfficial], 2022; Global Times [@globaltimesnews], 2022b; Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 [@zlj517], 2022).

The biolabs conspiracy theory did not stay confined to Russian and Chinese officials and their propaganda channels—it quickly spread across the U.S. podcasting ecosystem. Over a 10-day period beginning March 8—the day U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland testified to Congress that Washington had provided funding to Ukrainian labs conducting research to prevent the spread of pathogens—13 popular political podcasters devoted segments in 30 episodes to the false theory that the United States had funded biological weapons research in Ukraine, often with a tie-in

to COVID-19 (Brandt, Wirtschafter, et al., 2022; Kotsonis & Chakrabarti, 2022). On Bannon's War Room, Former Trump administration official Peter Navarro called Anthony Fauci "the common denominator here," suggesting that "whatever happened in Ukraine, he had to know about, just like he had to know about in China" (Bannon, n.d.). On the Charlie Kirk Show, Fox News journalist Lara Logan claimed that "Dr. Fauci's fingerprints are all over" the non-existent weapons program (Kirk, n.d.). And on his own show, Daniel Horowitz argued that funding for the purported program is "coming from Big Tech, the Western Oligarchs, the same nexus of tech-media, biolabs, the U.S. government and the Western Oligarchs that created COVID and created COVID fascism" (Horowitz, n.d.).

For Russia, the goal of this activity was to justify its illegal and unpopular invasion of Ukraine; to the extent it kicked up partisan fervor in the United States around pandemic-related public health measures, the Kremlin must also have been pleased. Importantly, the Russian government generally does not fabricate even its most elaborate conspiracy theories out of whole cloth; rather, it plays on existing fault lines and resentments within target societies. In the case of the biolabs conspiracy, which Russia continues to espouse, the Kremlin seeks to exploit anti-government sentiment kicked up by COVID-19 lockdowns and distrust over the origins of the virus—a skepticism they have promoted over years (Schafer et al., 2021).

For China, this effort was primarily designed to raise suspicion of the sort of lab it claims is responsible for the start of the pandemic—Fort Detrick, the U.S. army facility in Maryland. Notably, Beijing's first foray into the promotion of multiple, conflicting conspiracy theories was at the onset of the pandemic, when Zhao Lijian now infamously retweeted a blog post from Global Research Canada, a conspiracy website with non-transparent links to the Kremlin, promoting this idea. Over the past two years, Beijing has worked to mainstream that theory, as well as related claims: that COVID-19 is linked to the vaping disease EVALI (E-cigarette, or Vaping Product, Use Associated Lung Injury) or that it was originally transported to Wuhan through a shipment of Maine lobsters (Schafer, 2021; Solon et al., 2021). Beijing has also worked to smear Fort Detrick by tying it to Japan's notorious Unit 731, a germ warfare unit that targeted China during World War II (Schafer, 2021). Promoting the false theory that the United States has supported a bioweapons program in Ukraine is in keeping with this effort.

Unique Elements of Russia's Playbook

Perception Hacking

Particularly in election contexts, Russia exploits the anticipation that manipulation might take place to claim that it has, even in the absence of a successful campaign. For example, in 2020, when a malfunctioning application delayed the reporting of the Iowa Caucus results, the Kremlin seized the opportunity to amplify false claims that the election had been rigged by the “corporate media” and Democratic party elites (Brandt & Frankland, 2020; Frankland & Schafer, 2020). Russian actors acquired data on American voters in at least a couple of states, U.S. officials acknowledged in the weeks leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and they targeted dozens of state and local government networks (Ewing & Parks, 2020; “Russian State-Sponsored Advanced Persistent Threat Actor Compromises U.S. Government Targets,” 2020). That likewise could have been an effort to spread fear and uncertainty about the legitimacy of the election, even though the hackers were never in a position to compromise any results. This was perhaps the reason that Russian hackers accessed voting systems in multiple U.S. states in 2016, a bipartisan Senate investigation of the episode posited: to lay the groundwork for a later information operation discrediting the outcome, had the Kremlin's preferred candidate not won (Select Committee on Intelligence, 2020). Russia's attempts at hijacking fears of election rigging matured around the 2018 midterms. Shortly before polls closed on the evening of that contest, Moscow's infamous proxy troll farm, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), announced that it had conducted a successful, previously undetected influence campaign. A website published a list of fake Instagram accounts and a spreadsheet claiming to be advance results of every Senate contest; in a largely unsuccessful attempt to draw media attention to the campaign, individuals connected with the effort sent provocative messages to reporters (Brandt & Frankland, 2020; Collins, 2018).

“Perception hacking” efforts capitalize on the now widespread expectation of pervasive influence operations in order to drive up polarization, doubt, and division. Such an approach lowers the threshold for success, because influence operators do not need to actually change a single vote to create the impression that they might have—recognizing that the impression alone is damaging enough. It highlights the importance to defenders of carefully calibrating their responses. If they share too much

information about an operation, they risk reinforcing the perception that they aim to dispel; if they share too little, they risk leaks of politicized or incomplete information that also promotes corrosive distrust (Brandt & Frankland, 2020). In 2020, China considered but decided against targeting U.S. elections, even though the Trump administration worked to claim that it did, in a bid that was later roundly criticized by an intelligence community ombudsman report (Select Committee on Intelligence, 2021). China appears to be experimenting with information campaigns targeting the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, but it does not so far appear to have employed a perception hacking approach (Starks, 2022).

Conducting Retail Influence

Russia appears increasingly sophisticated at targeting particular influencers and communities within the United States and Europe as part of a targeted effort to reach specific audiences with tailored messages that are likely to resonate—and then circulate—within the wider information ecosystem. In 2019, for example, researchers exposed a large influence operation nicknamed “Operation Secondary Infektion” that involved creating forgeries, turning them into memes, writing stories about them on various small platforms, and then amplifying those stories using Facebook accounts run out of Russia (Nika Aleksejeva et al., 2019). That same year, researchers documented a second campaign that strongly resembled the first, involving the leak of U.K.-U.S. trade documents, which were first published on Reddit before articles about them appeared on smaller platforms. The perpetrators tweeted at least one post directly to U.K. politicians and media figures and emailed it to political activists (Ben Nimmo, 2019). The goal of these operations was not to build as wide an audience as possible or to generate substantial likes and retweets, but to reach specific micro-influencers and get them to repeat the information, thereby laundering it across the information ecosystem (Brandt & Frankland, 2020).

This activity represents a move away from information operations reliant on proxy troll farms that churn out large volumes of social media content and toward more targeted operations that are likely conducted by military intelligence. The shift may reflect the improvement in social platform detection mechanisms since 2016. It probably also reflects a more fundamental truth: that the Russian government does not need to churn out copious social media memes in order to disrupt American politics with polarizing

narratives about election legitimacy and other divisive political topics. Americans are already doing that to themselves (Brandt & Frankland, 2020; Brandt, 2021a).

Unique Elements of China's Playbook

Manufacturing the Appearance of Consensus

Where Russian government accounts on Twitter almost never engage with apparently inauthentic accounts, Beijing's "wolf warriors"—diplomats taking a new, more assertive approach to engagement online—appear to make this a regular practice. Researchers at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and the Alliance for Securing Democracy documented regular engagement by Chinese Communist Party officials with Twitter accounts bearing multiple hallmarks of inauthenticity, including handles that suggest computer generation, creation dates within a short interval, and the use of profile photos found elsewhere on the internet (Serrato & Schafer, 2020). Meanwhile, Chinese diplomats have also engaged with arguably ludicrous fakes—for example, the account of a food blog, @FtLaudyEATS, out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida that seems to have been repurposed to push pro-China content. This either reflects a surprising lack of digital savvy or, more likely, the challenge of building popular backing on a platform that is banned at home (Brandt & Schafer, 2020).

This activity is not confined to Twitter. Researchers and platform threat intelligence teams have identified multiple networks of false accounts linked to Chinese actors on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. These accounts push pro-China narratives, attack the United States's record on race, mock its response to the pandemic, question the safety of U.S.-produced vaccines, and highlight the failings of American democracy that were laid bare during the Capitol Riots (Burley, 2021; "Facebook Uncovers Chinese Network behind Fake Expert," 2021; Myers et al., 2022; Pearson & Culliford, 2021; Seitz, 2021; Timberg & Harris, 2020; Volz, 2021). Unlike Russia, which uses false accounts to entrap journalists, for example, China uses false accounts to create an echo chamber of support for pro-Beijing positions, making it seem as though an army of "netizens" (online citizens) agree with its view (Brandt, 2021a).

Co-opting Conversations on China's Rights Record

Beijing regularly deploys hashtag campaigns and slick travel videos, among other techniques, to drown out criticism of its human rights practices, especially but not exclusively in Xinjiang. In April 2020, it launched a dedicated English-language social media account, Discover Xinjiang (@DXinjiang), to share glossy images of the region's natural beauty, travel information, and accounts of thriving Uighur culture (Discover Xinjiang [DXinjiang], 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d). Among the top five most frequently used hashtags in tweets from Chinese diplomats containing the word "Xinjiang" at the time of this writing are #AmazingChina (an effort to highlight positive stories about Beijing) and #EidAlAdha and #EidAdhaMubarak (an effort to coopt conversations about the Muslim holiday with content that whitewashes or pushes a counter-narrative about the Chinese government's repressive treatment of Uighur Muslims, which includes forced labor and mass detention) (*Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard*, n.d.). Unlike Moscow, which produces a steady stream of content designed to dent the appeal of Western leaders and governing institutions and almost never covers itself, Beijing is quite focused on painting an attractive picture of its economic and political model (Brandt & Schafer, 2020).

The Autocrat's Audiences: Russia and China's Respective Targets

Because Russia works toward the limited goal of weakening its Western competitors and undermining the institutions and alliances that might constrain its interests, the Kremlin's information operations largely target European and American audiences. Using its suite of tools and tactics—trafficking in conspiracy theories, deploying Western influencers, and conducting retail influence operations—it works to reach citizens on both the left and right of the political spectrum within Western societies in order to exacerbate divisions and depress trust in institutions. Among its primary targets are so-called "fellow travelers"—including alternative thought leaders, journalists, and political activists—that share Russia's antipathy to the exercise of American power and the strengthening of European institutions, among other foreign policy priorities. To the

extent these targets channel or echo Kremlin talking points, they transform what might otherwise be viewed as Russian messaging into legitimate, authentic advocacy.

The Kremlin also carries out efforts to shape the information landscape in Latin America and Africa. These operations endeavor to sharpen negative attitudes toward Western governments and institutions and the governance model they represent. In other words, Moscow's information campaigns in these regions are largely instrumental: a means to the end of undermining the cohesion and denting the prestige of liberal democracies (Brandt and Cooper, 2022). In Latin America, the Kremlin generally uses overt tools and tactics, drawing on the widespread popularity of its state-backed media within the region, to reach the general public. There is some emerging evidence that the Kremlin also seeks to target local political and media influencers, as has been well documented in Europe.² Russia likewise carries out information manipulation activities that target African audiences, weaponizing both social and traditional media in order to expand its influence in a region where support for its policies typically runs high and to exacerbate anti-French sentiment, complicating matters for a Western competitor. Here again, Russia has targeted local journalists and activists in order to position its narratives as authentic advocacy.

China, by contrast, has the more expansive aim of presenting itself as a responsible global leader and reshaping the international order to suit its interests. Its information manipulation activities, like Russia's, primarily focus on its own region. However, Beijing is more active in Europe than Moscow is in Asia (Brandt and Cooper, 2022). Because it wants to shape the views of broad publics, and because it is less experienced than Russia in running intelligence-backed, targeted manipulation campaigns, China's information manipulation activities are largely directed at the general public. Its core tools and tactics—a sprawling state media apparatus, the ability to dominate search engine results on issues of great salience to the Chinese government, hashtag campaigns that co-opt critical conversations about China's rights record, and wolf warrior diplomats on Twitter—are mostly overt. Like Russia, China is increasingly working to target online influencers that can carry its messages, particularly on YouTube but also on TikTok and other platforms. Unlike Russia, the Chinese government uses domestic social media tools—such as WeChat channels run by Chinese Students and

² For a more detailed discussion, please see a forthcoming Brookings Institution paper by this author and Valerie Wirschafter.

Scholars Associations (CSSAs)—to reinforce official messaging among Chinese students at U.S. universities (Puyosa, 2022).

Understanding the Autocrat’s Worldview: Putin and Xi’s Messaging Priorities in the Context of Geopolitical Competition

Because Russia and China share certain near-term goals—denting the appeal of liberal democratic governments and the institutions that they have created—Russian and Chinese messaging share certain common themes. These include frequent reliance on whataboutism, or the raising of a counter accusation to deflect attention from their own failings, that often highlights the United States’s record on racial issues, its gun violence epidemic, and debates over Big Tech censorship. Both decry unfavorable reporting as disinformation and endeavor to cast the United States, NATO, and European institutions as hypocritical and aggressive. However, Russia is uniquely focused on exacerbating divisions within target societies and China is uniquely interested in burnishing its own image.

Common Themes

Both Moscow and Beijing deploy whataboutism to deflect criticism of their illiberal regimes and practices. Both highlight the United States’s record on race, policing, and the treatment of protestors, in order to detract from their own rights abuses and make the case that Washington’s support for protestors abroad is hypocritical. In the wake of the 2020 killing of George Floyd, Beijing’s diplomats used the #BlackLivesMatter, #GeorgeFloyd, and #ICantBreathe hashtags hundreds of times—a marked shift, since before the pandemic they were typically reluctant to weigh in on social or political rights issues within other countries (Brandt, 2021a). They trolled U.S. political leaders, claiming they applied “double standards” to the treatment of demonstrators (Feng, 2020). In one episode, China’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying replied to a tweet from a U.S. State Department official that called for solidarity with Hong Kong protestors with “I can’t breathe” (Hua Chunying 华春莹 [@SpokespersonCHN], 2020). This hasn’t abated. More recently, after the death of Jayland Walker in late June 2022, Hua tweeted, “How many more #GeorgeFloyds and #JaylandWalkers must die before

there is fairness and justice in the US?” alongside an image comparing Walker’s death to the peaceful arrest of the Highland Park shooter. Floyd was mentioned in more than 20 posts from Chinese officials and state media during the week of July 4, 2022 alone. Russia too used George Floyd’s death and the protests that ensued to deflect criticism of its own rights record and advance the idea that protests invariably lead to chaos (Higgins, 2020; redacted tonight [@RedactedTonight], 2020; RT [@RT_com], 2020; Russian Mission in Geneva [@mission_russian], 2020).

Both Moscow and Beijing offer lurid portrayals of American gun violence as part of an effort to paint the U.S. political model as broken, making it less appealing to would-be rights advocates at home. “Americans are screaming & running amid bullets,” read a tweet amplified by a Chinese diplomat in the wake of the Highland Park shooting, “while Chinese are cheering & laughing in water splashes” (Zhang Heqing张和清 [@ChaoyangShaoxia], 2022). The United States “has so many rights, but no #HumanRights,” argued another, in a post that called America “land of the gun obsessed, home of the mass shooting” (Xiao Yewen肖业文 [@XiaoYewen], 2022). After the Supreme Court struck down a New York law restricting gun-carrying rights, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian remarked on gun violence in the United States, noting “The American public (...) fear for their lives on an almost daily basis” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). This narrative was then amplified by state media and other diplomats (Bodnar, Schafer, et al., 2022b; libijian李碧建 [@libijian2], 2022). For its part, Russian state media amplified a conspiracy theory that Uvalde police themselves shot school children at Robb elementary, including a tweet asking, “don’t think the question is ‘did Uvalde PD shoot children in a panic?’ I think it’s ‘how many?’” (Wyatt Reed [@wyattreed13], 2022). Other content in the wake of that episode highlighted sales of bulletproof backpacks and gun training provided to teachers—vivid pictures of American dysfunction (Renegade Inc. [@Renegade_Inc], 2022; RT en Español [@ActualidadRT], 2022b).

Both Moscow and Beijing emphasize claims of Big Tech censorship in order to dent the appeal of the open internet, in contrast to their own tightly controlled versions of the web. For example, in the wake of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen’s disclosures—about the platform’s impact on teen mental health, its role in spreading conspiracy theories, and design decisions that allegedly harmed public safety—Russian state media trafficked in outlandish conspiracy theories, suggesting

that Haugen was a stooge of Western intelligence and that she was serving a “wider, darker agenda” of promoting government censorship of the internet (RT America [@RT_America], 2021b, 2021c; RT [@RT_com], 2021b). The Kremlin also seeded the notion that Haugen was a “Big Tech false flag,” orchestrated by “the worst of the swamp” in order to advance the goals of the platform itself and that her testimony was well-covered by the “mainstream media” because it supported the “pro-censorship, pro-control agenda” of “faux-communitarian pro-censorship elites” (Clark, 2021; Is Ex-Facebook “Whistleblower” A False Flag?, n.d.; RT America [@RT_America], 2021a; RT [@RT_com], 2021a). For Russia, this was an effort to widen partisan splits within the United States over Big Tech regulation, diminish the appeal of an open internet, and drive traffic from large, Western social-media platforms to darker, less well-moderated corners of the web (Brandt, 2021c). Chinese state media personalities, meanwhile, has protested the application of labels to Chinese government-backed outlets on Twitter, calling it “McCarthyism,” and amplified Western Big Tech critics who argue that Big Tech exploited the Ukraine crisis “to implement a scheme of information control” without precedent (Chen Weihua (陈卫华) [@chenweihua], 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e).

Meanwhile, both Moscow and Beijing push back on unfavorable reporting in Western news media by disparaging it as disinformation as part of a bid to discredit independent journalism. For example, in the wake of Western news reports that China asked Russia not to invade Ukraine until after the Olympics, China sought to discredit them as “disinformation” and Russia called them “fake news” (Brandt, 2022a; Global Times [@globaltimesnews], 2022a). Chinese officials also routinely amplified what is now seen as a Russian disinformation campaign casting the possibility of war in Ukraine as Western media “propaganda” and “information hysteria” (Cooper et al., 2022). Meanwhile, “fake news” is a term Russia routinely uses to characterize coverage of the Ukraine crisis—at times mentioning Reuters, the Associated Press, AFP, and other outlets by name or simply citing “Western” or “mainstream” media (Russia in India [@RusEmbIndia], 2022; Russia in Israel [@israel_mid_ru], 2022; Sputnik Mundo [@SputnikMundo], 2022; Посольство России в Мали и Нигере [@ambassade_russe], 2022). The goal of these efforts is to cast doubt on critical news coverage that draws attention to their misdeeds, heighten skepticism of independent media (itself an institution of democracy), and open information environments that pose a threat to their

grip on power at home, and advance the notion that there is no such thing as objective truth.

Finally, both assiduously endeavor to dent the appeal of democratic governments and international institutions—casting the United States, NATO and the European Union as the true aggressor in the Ukraine crisis, for example. In the weeks leading up to its invasion, Russia worked to frame NATO as the “reckless and irresponsible” party, “making dangerous attempts to gain a foothold on Ukrainian territory, and building up its military capabilities along Russian borders” and “doing everything it can to destabilize the European continent and undermine foundations of Europe’s security” (Dmitry Polyanskiy [@Dpol_un], 2021; Russia in RSA [@EmbassyofRussia], 2021). Putin continues to claim that the “collective West is the direct instigator and the culprit of what is happening today in Ukraine” (Russian Embassy, UK [@RussianEmbassy], 2022). Since February 1 of this year, Chinese diplomats and state media have mentioned the term “legitimate security concerns” related to NATO enlargement, a reference to Russia’s defense of its actions in Ukraine as having been prompted by perceived aggression from the alliance, more than 200 times (Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard, 2022). As Zack Cooper, Bret Schafer, and Etienne Soula have documented, between mid-January and mid-March of this year, “mentions of NATO’s eastward expansion have increased 500 percent in Chinese Twitter posts compared to mentions of the issue in Chinese posts in the entirety of 2021” (Cooper et al., 2022). They also documented that during roughly the same period, Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts made hundreds of posts on Facebook and Twitter referencing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Serbia, and Yemen, and alleging that Western governments’ responses to and media’s coverage of the war in Ukraine are hypocritical (Cooper et al., 2022).

Russia’s Distinct Messaging Priorities

Russia seeks to promote divisive content that drives polarization up and social trust down within target societies, while pushing back on what it perceives as anti-Russia bias (Brandt, 2021a). Just in recent weeks, the Kremlin has attacked President Biden for supply chain challenges, questioned his mental fitness for office, posted a lurid meme linking his son to drug abuse, amplified former President Trump’s remark that the United States is a “failed nation” because of crime rates under his administration, suggested he paid for prostitutes for his son, and implied that his Ukraine policies are “driving an exodus” from the democratic party (“Biden’s Ukraine Policies, Democratic Party’s

Intolerance Help Drive Voter Exodus," 2022; Bodnar & Schafer, 2022; Lee Stranahan [@stranahan], 2022; RT en Español [@ActualidadRT], 2022c, 2022d; RT [@RT_com], 2022a, 2022b). After the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe vs. Wade, Russian state media amplified the most extreme responses from progressives, at times boosting content from American voices on the far-right, in order to paint U.S. liberals as violent (Bodnar, Sikora, et al., 2022). Russian state media also showcased clashes between protestors and police (including one incident where a so-called "pro-abortion extremist" "busted up" a police vehicle); highlighted a flag burning; boosted an angry remark from a demonstrator that he "f*cking love[s] killing babies"; and predicted "civil war" (Bodnar, Sikora, et al., 2022; Lee Stranahan [@jasonrantz], 2022; lifenews_ru [@lifenews_ru], 2022; RT Última Hora [@RTultimahora], 2022; Sputnik [@SputnikInt], 2022a, 2022b). Russia does not endeavor to attract audiences to its way of doing business, but to dampen the appeal of liberal systems and make it harder for democracies to build and exercise soft power.

China's Distinct Messaging Priorities

China, on the other hand, is quite focused on touting the strengths of its governance model, co-opting the language of liberalism—framing itself as a "whole-process democracy"—and drowning out criticism of its rights record. It has used that description of its governance system countless times over many months, claiming that it "enables the Chinese people to broadly and continuously participate in the day-to-day political activities" and encourages people to vote (China Daily [@ChinaDaily], 2022; Liu Pengyu 刘鹏宇 [@SpoxCHNinUS], 2022; MA Hui 马辉 [@MahuiChina], 2022). Beijing has also used the concept to draw contrast with democratic systems, arguing that "unlike some Western countries, where discussion and consultation lead to division, whole-process democracy resolves differences & unites society" (Global Times [@globaltimesnews], 2022c). At times, this effort has intersected with attempts to push back on criticisms of its repression in Xinjiang. "Xinjiang has both size & strength to demonstrate its achievements unseen in human history," argued one Chinese diplomat on Twitter, "It's the people-centered whole process democracy that makes this happen in a place desperately smeared by Americans. But they're irrelevant!" (CG_Zha Liyou 查立友 [@ZhaLiyou], 2022). This reflects Beijing's interest in reframing notions of human rights and self-government in order to make the world safe for its illiberalism.

Reimagining Strategic Communications Capabilities to Meet the Moment

Whether or not they are coordinated, Russia and China's respective activities in the information space are reinforcing and compounding. Russia's efforts to damage the appeal of governments and institutions creates space for China to propose its economic and governance model as an attractive alternative. And to the extent that Russia's efforts to weaken its competitors from within by amplifying domestic splits leaves them distracted and divided, it makes them less likely to carry out a forward-leaning foreign policy that would constrain not only Moscow, but also Beijing. Meanwhile, Beijing's reliance on Russian propaganda to traffic in conspiratorial falsehoods doesn't suit Chinese interests (shedding a degree of responsibility for such content) alone—it lends legitimacy to Moscow's corrosive, deceitful claims. And the combined result of all of this activity is to erode international human rights norms regarding privacy and the freedoms of expression and thought.

Despite its consequences, democratic societies, including the United States, have been slow to appreciate the nature of the competition with Russia and China now underway in the information domain. Responses have too often been reactive and siloed—carried out by individual entities, whether government or civil society—when what is needed is a broad, proactive, coordinated, whole-of-society effort to push back on Russia and China's advances, building on liberal values and the myriad strengths of liberal societies (*Linking Values and Strategy*, 2020). For the United States, these include robust norms that protect free expression, a culture of journalistic independence and integrity, a vibrant innovation economy, advanced capabilities in the cyber domain, centrality in global financial markets, and vibrant network of partners and allies, among others.

As a starting point, Washington should resist the temptation to respond in kind to autocratic information manipulation, as France was recently exposed as doing, since doing so would mean the contest takes place on territory of the competitor's choosing. Russia and China deliberately contest the information space using the tactics highlighted in this paper because they view it as advantageous terrain. And they might be right. Democracies depend on the idea that the truth is knowable and citizens can discern it and deploy it in order to govern themselves. Illiberal systems have no such

need for a healthy information environment to survive. In fact, illiberal leaders benefit from widespread skepticism that there is such a thing as objective truth (Brandt, 2021a). This is because to the extent such skepticism feeds polarization and division, it weakens the United States, Europe, and other liberal societies from within. Because this skepticism fosters a sort of moral equivalence between liberalism and illiberalism, it makes the world safer for their own norms and practices. Making it harder for human and civil rights advocates at home to make objective moral claims and for those claims to gain purchase strengthens autocratic leaders' grip on domestic political power.

To be sure, the United States and other liberal democracies have at times used deception when communicating with foreign audiences, as well as its own citizens. For example, Washington carried out multiple, non-transparent information campaigns in target societies throughout the Cold War (Ward et al., 2019). As recently as 2020, the U.S. Agency for International Development had plans to build a text-based social network in Cuba that could be used to non-transparently introduce content designed to inspire "smart mobs" that could trigger a domestic political uprising (Guardian, 2014). Just this summer, Twitter and Meta announced that they had taken down two overlapping networks for violating their terms of service, and shared data with independent researchers who identified a web of accounts that used deceptive tactics to promote the interests of the United States and its allies in the Middle East and Central Asia (Graphika, 2022). Neither company publicly attributed the activity to any entity, but if in fact the United States government was behind these campaigns, its approach entailed great reputational risk and yet was not particularly effective: researchers found that the vast majority of posts and tweets received very little engagement.

Each of these activities was ultimately exposed by a vibrant, independent, investigative media and civil society ecosystem that spoke truth to power and held it to account. Nontransparent information activities of this sort are, or at least should be, less frequent and more limited than those carried out by the United States' authoritarian counterparts, given the normative and institutional constraints that emerged in the United States in the 1970s to curtail official deception, particularly about government policies (Brandt, 2021b). These constraints may be incomplete and fragile, as recent political developments have laid bare, but they are nevertheless consequential. Importantly, these constraints can only be strengthened if affirmed; should the United

States government act in a way that does not affirm its commitment to truth, these constraints will be undermined.

Take, for example, the case of France. A network of fake accounts linked to the French military surreptitiously dueled with Russian trolls in fourteen African countries, including the Central African Republic ahead of elections there (Stubbs, 2020). Rather than imitating or engaging with Russia's information operations in Africa, the French government could have simply exposed them. Instead of disregarding African publics—a move that could contribute to precisely the anti-French sentiment Paris was seeking to avoid—the French government could have shared information with affected African governments and explored substantive cooperation to build the capacity to face a mutual challenge (Brandt, 2021b). Such a move would have been much more likely to generate goodwill and ultimately resilience, positioning France for greater long-term success while upholding robust and vibrant democratic discourse. It would also have been in line with the French government's own caution not to "yield to the temptation of counter-propaganda" (Vilmer et al., 2018).

Over the long run, open information environments are a tremendous advantage in this contest. They facilitate responsive political systems, where citizens can speak truth to power—enabling policymakers to recognize mistakes and adjust course and allowing civil society researchers and independent journalists to expose corruption and hold perpetrators accountable. In short, they enable democratic societies to continually improve themselves, unlike their competitors. That is a strength in itself; it can also be crucial to disproving narratives that sow doubt about democratic institutions and their effectiveness (*Linking Values and Strategy*, 2020). Despite these advantages, in the short run, open information environments pose several liabilities for liberal societies. At low cost and with a degree of deniability, outside actors can try to inject themselves into and shape that open discourse, and efforts to combat this interference runs head first into freedom of expression (Brandt, 2021b). Meanwhile, because of the central importance of healthy, vibrant information systems to the functioning of democratic societies, damaging them is consequential. There are other asymmetries as well. Because most major social media platforms are headquartered in the West, for example, Russia and China can manipulate them, without much concern for the economic damage doing so might cause. Meanwhile, Russia and China's repressive

political systems, unlike liberal ones, apply few costs to government lying, which means Putin and Xi are relatively free to deploy deception at liberty (Brandt, 2021b).

Recognizing these dynamics, the United States needs a strategy for competitive success—one that is rooted in democratic values and that leverages asymmetric advantages of its own. This strategy will require action both within and beyond the information domain.

Within the Information Domain

Washington should take the persistent engagement approach it designed for cyberspace and apply it to the information domain (recognizing that there is a first mover advantage to framing the debate), thereby harnessing the truth to contest the information space (Rosenberger & Gorman, 2020). Washington recently demonstrated what just such a strategy could look like, with its effort to quickly expose and declassify information about the Kremlin's false flag attempts ahead of and designed to justify its invasion of Ukraine. Highlighting Russian troop death numbers, for example, is another way that Washington has pressed on a vulnerability of Putin's: truthful information highlighting the cost of his misadventure in Ukraine, which could boost the unpopularity of the war among Russian citizens at home.

To implement this approach in a way that ensures it will be maximally successful, policymakers should consider several factors. Because these efforts are likely to frequently draw on information developed by the intelligence community that falls under the purview of multiple executive branch departments, they will need to be organized at the interagency level. And to the extent these activities have implications for foreign partners, they would be best carried out in cooperation with relevant governments. Washington should also bear in mind that the exposure strategy it pursued around Russia's invasion of Ukraine benefited enormously from the existence of a mature, independent, community of open-source researchers and investigative journalists that corroborated government messaging. Particularly in light of the history surrounding U.S. intelligence statements ahead of the Second Gulf War, U.S. administrations should not assume their pronouncements will be widely trusted among broad swaths of the public, absent independent affirmation. In terms of tactical

strategies for public diplomacy, Washington should resist the urge to respond to whataboutism with thorough, point-for-point rebuttals, recognizing that doing so prolongs a conversation on the competitor's terms. Instead, U.S. public diplomacy efforts should focus on highlighting the tactics autocrats use to discredit the United States and its allies and to distort their own records—for example, “whataboutism.” Public diplomacy efforts should also endeavor to contrast Russia and China's system of government with the more open U.S. model.³ Washington should not be afraid of acknowledging where it has fallen short of its aspirations and ideals and instead should emphasize the power of continuous renewal and the value of having a vibrant media and civil society that shines a light on inequality and moves American society closer to fulfilling its promise of liberty and justice for all. This is something that Russia and China cannot offer to their audiences at home and that seems likely to be broadly appealing to audiences around the world, who live in environments that are considerably less free. Doing so should not require new resources or organizational mechanisms as much as a mindset shift on the part of existing public diplomacy leaders.

Similarly, Washington should look to improve upon content-sharing mechanisms, like the State Department's Content Commons, that enable approved social media and digital content to be shared smoothly across government agencies. The current repository is an asset, but public diplomacy professionals frequently report that its contents are underwhelming. Improvements could include expanding it to include a wide variety of content in various formats—professionally produced infographics and U.S. Agency for Global Media-produced originals, among others. The goal should be for different quarters of government to be able to quickly access and share top-performing content developed by others, raising the quality of outputs across the board.⁴

Finally, Washington should devote additional public diplomacy resources to Latin America, where Russian state-backed content is highly popular. Of the top five most frequently retweeted Russian state media accounts on Twitter over the past year, for example, two are in Spanish (@ActualidadRT and @RTUltimaHora). The Twitter account of RT en Español (@ActualidadRT) has more followers than its primary English-language

³ For a more detailed discussion, please see a forthcoming paper by this author.

⁴ These ideas were developed in coordination with Bret Schafer and Rachael Dean Wilson of the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in connection with a forthcoming paper on public diplomacy in the age of information competition.

account (@RT_com) and has been retweeted more than twice as often, also over the past year (Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard, 2022). This has proven consequential in the context of the Ukraine crisis, during which Putin has assiduously courted leaders in the region in an effort to build political support for his cause (Nicas & Troianovski, 2022). As of April, RT en Español was the third most-shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Putin's invasion (Klepper & Seitz, 2022). According to analyst Oliver Stuenkel, "anecdotal evidence suggests many Latin American voters believe NATO is as much responsible for the war as Russia" (Stuenkel, 2022). Washington has woken up to the threat that Russian disinformation in Europe and the United States has posed; it should turn equal attention to the challenge in its own hemisphere. This should entail equipping the State Department's Global Engagement Center with the financial resources and requisite personnel to actively monitor the information landscape in the region—recognizing both that Spanish is the fourth most spoken language in the world, meaning Russia's activities directed at Spanish-speaking audiences could reach wide publics, and that the United States government and the research community have historically tended to focus on other challenges.

Thinking Beyond the Information Domain

In the spirit of reframing the information competition on its own terms, Washington should think beyond the information domain, and respond to Russia and China's information manipulation activities on the terrain of its choosing. As a first step, Washington should continue to use its advanced cyber capabilities, within existing authorities and as appropriate, to limit autocrats' ability to conduct information manipulation campaigns, as U.S. Cyber Command did in 2018, when it took the Internet Research Agency, a troll farm operated by Kremlin proxies engaged in online propaganda and influence operations, offline for a few days around the midterms, and again in 2020, when it conducted more than two dozen cyber operations targeting foreign threats as part of its "hunt forward" approach to protecting the U.S. presidential election (Conte, 2021). As the 2022 midterms approach, and warnings mount the National Security Agency and U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) have jointly launched an Election Security Group to defend against foreign adversaries and "when necessary, impose costs" (Manson, 2022; Uberti, 2022). This is a positive step. Said USCYBERCOM Commander General Nakasone recently, "We do have a series of operations that we're conducting now and into the future as we approach the fall"

(Uberti, 2022). Another strand of activity could entail sanctioning the perpetrators of information manipulation campaigns, recognizing that the Kremlin and its cronies are largely reliant on the U.S. financial system to both hide and access their wealth. Such an effort would build on steps the U.S. Treasury took in March of this year, when it designated 11 Russian intelligence-directed outlets and their leaders for spreading disinformation designed to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Kern, 2022). In 2021, Treasury targeted four disinformation outlets run by Russian intelligence services—InfoRos, SouthFront, Strategic Culture Foundation, and NewsFront—for their attempts to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). This is in keeping with an approach that is emerging among allies. In March, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell told the European Parliament that he will propose a new mechanism that will allow Europe to sanction disinformation actors (“EU to Propose Sanctions Regime against Disinformation,” 2022).

Ultimately, Washington will need to equip itself to see across the full threat landscape. Building strong mechanisms of coordination across branches and levels of government can help ensure that relevant parties are operating from a coherent picture and are able to anticipate national security threats in the information domain. The effort to build a Foreign Malign Influence Response Center within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence is an important move toward this goal. The center should be scoped and ultimately resourced to deal with threats beyond elections (recognizing that they are but flashpoints for this activity, which is largely ongoing) and to build a safety net against the politicization of its activities, which is a real danger. The center should aim to cut across stovepipes within government and to share information with private sector partners, other democratic governments, and the public (Hanlon, 2021).

Finally, Washington should coordinate with partners and allies, recognizing that its strong network of relationships with like-minded nations—both their governments and their people—is perhaps its greatest advantage in what is ultimately a contest over systems and principles. The United States should stand side by side with the many liberal societies that are facing this threat, exchanging lessons and best practices, sharing intelligence, and collaborating on responses.

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Background Research Gates Forum I

A Reliable Friend and Strategic Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region: Japan's Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy

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Executive Summary

Japan's Strengths in Alliance with the US

- Tokyo and Washington are in policy alignment with regard to Chinese unilateral intentions to create a Sino-centric order in the East China Sea and South China Sea.
- Both democratic capitals perceive China as a hegemonic threat to the rules-based order and universal values (democracy, freedom, human rights) that form the foundation of US-Japan relations.
- Shinzo Abe's legacy vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), along with regional Japan-led initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("The Quad"), are designed to serve as both a security counterbalance to China's military activities in the South China Sea and to offer a regional aspirational alternative to ambivalent ASEAN states.
- The Japan-US Alliance remains unshakeable, reinforced by quadrilateral cooperation among "The Quad" (Japan, US, Australia, and India).
- Official development assistance (ODA) & multilateralism leadership

Japan's Strengths on Its Own

- Global goodwill and a high degree of trust are advantages over China.
- Japan enjoys cultural superpower status.
- Japan's *Toitsu* 統 unity in purpose that characterizes the country in response to natural disasters is a strength of national character, with applications for building a strategic communications response to international crises.
- Japan invests heavily in Southeast Asia to promote intra-regional economic integration and strategic autonomy when ASEAN makes choices involving China.
- Japan is a trusted bilateral partner to the United States and the most trusted extra-regional nation in Southeast Asia.

- Japan's diplomacy advantage is listening. As Fumio Kishida, Japan's Prime Minister, has stated, "The key to diplomacy is to listen to what the other person has to say first. Everything starts from there. You must not push your ideas onto the other country. If you do, the other side will not accept them."
- Japan seeks to be a rising role model in Asia in rule-making and maintaining order, as a means to move away from its reputation as strictly a US surrogate country.
- Japan's closeness with India translates into a common concern about China's growing military presence in the region and the concomitant pressure to maintain peace and security.
- Japan is growing as a "third option" (neither the US nor China) for Southeast Asians who view Japan as somewhat removed from great power competition that forces choosing sides.
- Since the majority of Southeast Asian publics do not wish to be part of an ideological battleground between China and the US, this offers Japan the opportunity to build a strategic communications profile distinct from the US.

Japan's Weaknesses

- A new National Security Strategy is still on the drawing table.
- Japan's lack of a formalized national security apparatus until this century delayed the application of strategic communications to policy goals and forces a catch-up strategy.
- The lack of a strong political will or political participation in Japan makes strategic communications much less visible than in the US, where there is a 20-year precedent associated with post-9/11 actions.
- Japan's public diplomacy and strategic communications (PD/SC) is conservative, controlled, and centered in Tokyo. Unlike Washington, which has advocated for more integration of purpose by agency and personnel,

Japan maintains a traditional one-way PR “push posture” with both domestic and foreign publics, as opposed to an interactive, two-way model that seeks feedback and employs iterative and summative evaluation.

- Japan puts the command—not the audience—at the center of narrative crafting.
- Japan favors policy messaging over policy actions, which keeps Japan as the much weaker partner to the US in PD/SC.
- Japan’s public affairs and global media relations apparatus pales in comparison to the US. The recent Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD8) in Tunisia received minimal publicity, due in part to low interaction by Japan state actors with foreign press.
- In contrast to the US, Japan’s attitude is that “good deeds speak for themselves” and need no extra messaging.
- NHK is no CGTN—Japan’s state-sponsored global broadcasting is weak compared to competitors.
- Japan lacks an educational foundation in public relations, marketing, and communications—its institutions of higher education tend not to offer these as a major course of study, only some coursework on the subject..
- There has been a gradual decline of foreign press presence in Japan and government-press relations.
- Japan’s relationship-building and networking overall lags in comparison to its G7 peers.
- A poor digital media presence in English hampers Japan’s global outreach efforts; many sites are not available in English.
- Significant gaps exist in Japan’s leadership on gender and global higher education.

Opportunities for Japan

- Japan’s goodwill reputation in Southeast Asia creates opportunities for more collaboration: Japan could improve its strategic partnership ties

with Vietnam through more investment in Vietnam’s ten-year socio-economic goals.

- Japan’s international cooperation agenda and reputation through an agency like JICA creates enormous potential for a stronger PD/SC mission.
- Japan-India common concerns over regional security create opportunities to engage in SC collaboration involving development and economic security.
- Japan can tap into its goodwill through allowing allied actors, including sympathetic media outlets, to advocate on the primary source’s behalf. This is much more likely to enhance credibility if a third-party actor is involved.
- Japan can also tap into the Japanese public’s support for the UN system and multilateral relations.

Threats to Japan

- China’s global media presence continues to increase in sync with China’s global rise.
- Growing fears of a US-China geopolitical rivalry and possible violent confrontation, accidental or otherwise, has a spillover effect in Japan due to its close relationship with the United States.
- There is a notable dearth of intellectual exchanges and cultural engagements between Japan and other countries, compared to great power competitors like China. So long as Japan (and the US) continue to view the international exchange of persons as more of a resume enhancer and individual life changer, China will continue to have an enormous advantage over them. This is coupled with a perception of cultural insularity: do Japan’s people care about what is happening globally?
- Japan’s careful avoidance of its wartime history hampers the improvement of relations today.

Recommendations for Japan and the US

- Japan needs to have a national discourse strategy with its own people to explain policy changes in response to the defiance of the

international order from regional neighbors Russia, China, and North Korea.

- Japan's popular narrative of a post-WWII pacifist country no longer applies in light of international instability that mandates doubling of defense budget increases and a NATO partnership upgrade.
- Tokyo should engage with global publics generally and Indo-Pacific publics specifically to make the case for US-Japan leadership in the region as a trusted and counterbalanced economic security partner to offset China's economic and security ambitions as well as threats from the North Korean and Russian regimes.
- The US and Japan together and separately need to practice more active listening, not just repeat declarations ("lecturing") about universal and democratic values.

- Prioritizing stronger economic ties with target nations, particularly in Southeast Asia, will do more to persuade publics than security goals alone.
- Both the US and Japan need to show more care for the needs and wants of foreign and domestic publics to move PD/SC away from the policy elites and intellectual realm.
- Japan should put the audience—not the command—at the center of narrative crafting.
- Narrative framing (i.e., storytelling) should be made a higher priority in the government, higher education, and public affairs. Issues don't market policies effectively, only the stories about those policies.

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Japan's Strategic Communications

There is no relationship like that between the US and Japan which lends itself better to an opportunity for a more synchronized approach to strategic communications (SC). However, Japan's geostrategic and political imperative for pursuing a more active SC has evolved slowly in the last two decades and has not reached the level of conscious awareness that it has in the United States. "Strategic communications" is not only a different word in Japan, but its practice and study are a new frontier in an almost exclusive domain of the Self Defense Force (SDF). The term Strat Com, commonly employed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States, has an altogether different connotation in Japan. In Japan, Strat Com refers to the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). Defense circles in Japan use the abbreviation "SC" to refer to strategic communications.

Two events drove Japan's awakening in the twenty-first century for a National Security Strategy and National Security Council: 9/11 in the United States and the triple disaster in Tohoku, Japan known as March 11 (3/11). On 9/11, there was no National Security Council counterpart to Washington in Tokyo, and Japan felt vulnerable to violent attacks from extremists. Japan had no named Ministry of Defense until 2007. Before then, it was called the Japan Defense Agency, a diminutive title for an agency that represented 250,000 SDF personnel consisting of air, maritime, and naval self-defense forces. Japan's National Security Council was finally formulated on December 4, 2013, one year after Shinzo Abe assumed his second term as Prime Minister and over a decade after 9/11.

Within Japan's SC circles, Prime Minister Abe's second term as prime minister (2012-2020) is viewed in the context of a strategic communications rise, due to the overlap with the creation of Japan's national security infrastructure. Abe utilized global outreach better than any of his predecessors. He was a proactive but controversial driver in shaping Japan's revisionist grand narrative who used a small, talented team of overseas-trained Japanese to amplify his vision to the world. Abe's speechwriter, Tomohiko Taniguchi, a former journalist turned strategic communications expert, was always by Abe's side, as Karl Rove was to George W. Bush. Taniguchi shared Abe's strategic vision and added new ideas to Abe's speeches. This hybrid nature, of Mr. Abe's political will and Taniguchi's skill in strategic communications, has not been replicated in the subsequent Suga and Kishida administrations.

The US has always taken the lead in defining Japan's strategic communications through its efforts to increase Japan's security responsibilities in the Greater Asia region. First, in Afghanistan, the Obama administration and NATO called on the SDF for capacity-building, following the US-led surge operation in Afghanistan. After 3/11 and the success of Operation Tomodachi to help restore the damaged Tohoku area, Obama initiated the "Pivot to East Asia" that included strengthening relations with not only bilateral security partners like Japan but also emerging powers like China. The US called on Japan to step up its defense engagement, not only in Northeast Asia but also toward ASEAN countries and the Indo-Pacific region (e.g., India), while also supporting US efforts in the Middle East and with official development assistance (ODA).

Japan's response to US pressure was to streamline a seamless strategic response across a wide swath of the government, from the four-minister level (Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Defense, Minister of Foreign Affairs) at the top down to the Japanese Coast Guard, transportation, police and defense personnel. This was a natural adaptation to the needs of the multilateral security operations that necessitated strategic communications. Adding SC to an operation changed the level of urgency; strategy referred to military but also took on a meaning of "very important" or "critical importance." Strategic communications in Japan is therefore not limited to military discourse but also refers to critical messages to be sent.

A strategic communications narrative is not coordinated closely with university partners or think tanks in Tokyo, in contrast to Washington. Japan's emphasis is elite-directed and elite-targeted, centralized in Tokyo among a few state actors and alphabet agencies of the government: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Ministry of Defense (MOD), and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Outside of the MOD, SC is a much lesser-known and practiced concept in Japan, with a few exceptions. One is the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Tokyo (Aoi, 2017) that announced the establishment of a Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit in July 2022 (University of Tokyo, 2022). This new unit adopted a NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence definition (2020) of strategic communications based on "[a] holistic approach to communication based on values

and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment” (Aoi, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Japan’s greatest SC challenge is domestic. The government is reluctant to explain the need for more defense expenditures and shared military responsibility to a public beholden to the pacifist image and peace brand of postwar Japan. As Associated Press (AP) reporter Mari Yamaguchi (2021) observed: “It’s not an easy sell. In a nation still reviled by many of its neighbors for its past military actions, and where domestic pacifism runs high, any military buildup is controversial. Japan has focused on its defensive capabilities and carefully avoids using the word ‘military’ for its troops. But as it looks to defend its territorial and military interests against an assertive China, North Korea and Russia, officials in Tokyo are pushing citizens to put aside widespread unease over a more robust role for the military and support increased defense spending.”

Japan’s Public Diplomacy

Japan’s public diplomacy could benefit more from what it is well known for in the classroom and in the workplace: active listening. In Japanese society, from K-12 through higher education to the workplace and in everyday communication, the premium norm is to listen before speaking. The *sensei* (“a teacher”) is perceived as all-knowing and the *senpai* (“senior”) is deferred to by the *kohai* (“junior”), even if the age difference is one day. As a high-context, communicative culture when compared to the low-context culture of the US, Japan relies more on nonverbal cues to relay messages, intentions, feelings and information. In the Buddhist and Shinto traditions, silence is seen as a virtue. Members of your own group do not need words to communicate; you know each other intuitively. In a Japanese context, using many words to explain is a sign that you are communicating with someone from outside your group. Your ability to hold your tongue from lashing out repressed emotions symbolizes having a sense of the divine and respecting others. Japan’s domestic culture advantages fewer words and silence as powerful forms of communication, but these are a disadvantage internationally. Competitive public diplomacy places a premium on listening that leads to effective advocacy of policies.

Westerners often find themselves on the short end of the negotiating stick because they emphasize declarative statements and speak first and often in order to advantage their position in negotiations. The Asian states, to varying degrees, frown upon coming to conclusions too early before the relationship has been established and secured. This is why listening closely to a proposal is highly valued, and an absolutist response to that proposal is avoided. Where this becomes problematic is when one considers the second approach that nation-state actors use to engage foreign publics: advocacy. Advocacy is especially difficult for the conflict-avoiding, risk-averse Japanese and places them in a disadvantaged public diplomacy position to China, whose culture is more extroverted and accepting of risk than Japan.

Advocacy

According to Cull (2019, p. 4), advocacy refers to “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by presenting a particular policy, idea or the actor’s general interest to a foreign public.” By definition it is proactive, not reactive, and its products include social media outreach, embassy press relations, and press briefings to foreign journalists. One example is the Foreign Press Center Japan (FPCJ)¹ that was founded in 1976, when Japan was garnering global appeal for its economic miracle. Today, key Government of Japan ministries and agencies—PMO, MOD, MOFA, METI, and Tokyo Metropolitan Government—advocate their policies to the “375 reporters affiliated with 132 media organizations from 25 countries and regions working in Japan to transmit news from Japan to the world” (FPCJ brochure).

There are major challenges facing the advocacy element of Japan’s public diplomacy. One is that the scarcity of in-country members of the foreign press leads to few opportunities to strengthen press-government relations. The height of global media interest in Japan came with its economic superpower days. Today’s digital media world doesn’t require a journalist to be stationed in-country, and members of the foreign press who do not speak Japanese have concerns about getting access to sources who may not be bilingual. While fewer Western media are coming to cover Japan, countries in Southeast Asia as well as China and South Korea are sending

¹ FPCJ Mission Statement: “The FPCJ proactively supports foreign media in order to promote the diversity and accuracy of foreign reporting from Japan. It is also actively engaged in getting valuable information sent out from many different places and fields in Japan to the world. Through these activities, the FPCJ brings “Japan as it really is” to the world, gives in-depth understanding of Japan, and helps create an international society where people respect different cultures and values. It also aims to make a difference to global peace and development.”

more correspondents and launching Japanese language services, as is the case with China.²

To address global media gap challenges, the Government of Japan is actively promoting the idea that Tokyo, consistently named among the most popular places to live in the world,³ also become a Fin City (Financial City) and a Global Media City with CNN International headquarters shifting from Hong Kong to Tokyo (personal communication, Shikata, April 2022).

Coupled with a lack of foreign press in place is the low level of media literacy in government and higher education. Japanese universities do not have public relations and communications as a major course of study, only some coursework on the subject. Employees get assigned to public relations rotations, but with no background in the subject, they often flounder. In media monitoring reports to the government, traditional elite media sources are preferred, almost exclusively from the US, the UK, or Japan. In both listening and advocacy, Japan might consider applying the wisdom of a friend of both Japan and China, Ezra Vogel, who said, “The Chinese have a saying, ‘bystanders can be clearer’ (*pangguanzhe qing*), and the Japanese have made this expression into a Japanese expression as well” (Vogel, 2019, viii). In other words, Japan should not narrow the media landscape to elite media only but rather add bystander media in other parts of the world, including India, Singapore, Australia, Africa, and Latin America.

This tendency to listen to the opinions of elite media at the top also applies to Japanese institutions of higher education. The country has over 700 colleges and universities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT) and yet just a handful of universities that rank in the annual *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.⁴ In 2015, China’s Top 20 in higher education outranked Japan for the first time, five years after China had surpassed Japan’s GDP. Abe’s aim for the internationalization of Japan’s higher education in his second term as prime minister was to move ten Japanese universities into the Top 100 by 2020, an as yet unrealized goal.

² The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China. Press Release. Xinhua launches Japanese News Service. February 1, 2018. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1618692/1618692.htm>

³ The Global Power City Index (GPCI) ranks the major cities of the world according to their “magnetism,” the power to attract people, capital, and enterprises from around the world. It does so through measuring six functions—Economy, Research and Development, Cultural Interaction, Livability, Environment, and Accessibility—providing a multidimensional ranking. Tokyo ranks third, behind London and New York.

⁴ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>

Cultural Diplomacy and Exchanges

Further complicating Japan's ability to compete in global persuasion is that China is the "lodestar" in educational exchange and cultural diplomacy. In 2002, China hosted about 85,000 foreign students. By 2016, that number had increased to over 440,000, according to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CSIS, 2017). Meanwhile, Japan hosted 300,000 foreign students in 2019, an increase of 200,000 over two decades (Horie, 2002; JASSO, 2020).

In comparison to Japan, China understands national brand management across the entire political economy, and to that end focuses on person-to-person engagement and exchange diplomacy. China leads the world in elite-to-elite diplomacy (Custer et al., 2018). Before Covid-19, China entertained more visiting dignitaries and its faculty and students traveled more globally, all with an emphasis on building closer ties: China to the world and the world to China. China's sister-city ties have expanded 115 percent since 2000, with 950 sister cities in the Asia-Pacific region, including 337 in Japan (Custe et al., 2018). China has also doubled down on informational diplomacy. Japan has no comparable conceptual paradigm. NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation), which may desire to expand its international and regional reputation, can't compete with China's state-owned media companies that are integrated with China's messaging and targeting of global publics. At the time of Xi Jinping's election to a second presidential term in March 2018, China announced the merger of China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International, and China National Radio under a single network, China Media Group, also known as "Voice of China," whose purpose includes strengthening international communication and telling good China stories. CNN business writer Steven Jiang (2018) reported about it with the headline, "Beijing has a new propaganda weapon: Voice of China." In this case, the headline was accurate, not sensational. China's full-spectrum approach to information openly engages the world with state-sponsored propaganda media. Free and open societies like Japan and the United States may eschew the propaganda label, but they also have engaged in propaganda campaigns, as the US did to rally public support during World War II.⁵

⁵ This online exhibit of The National Archives in Washington, DC features 11 posters, 2 audio files and a video from a more extensive exhibition that was on view at the National Archives Museum in Washington, DC from May 1994 to

Former president of The Japan Foundation, Kazuo Ogoura (2009) defines cultural diplomacy as “the use of cultural means to enhance a nation’s political influence.” Japan has many cultural touchstones that have gone global, from cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji to Noh theater and more recent Japan House cultural centers in London, Los Angeles, and Sao Paolo. In postwar Japan, Kabuki was performed first in China in 1955.

Cultural diplomacy and cultural and educational exchanges are often used interchangeably in Japan as part of its soft power footprint. Cultural exchange takes on a higher public policy element due to Japan’s decades-long emphasis on internationalization through exchanges.

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program began in 1987 “with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations,” but also in response to outside pressure to internationalize and diversify the country and to help Japanese students learn English from native speakers.⁶

It is hard to believe it now, but well into the 1980s and post-Cold War 1990s, Japan was known as an economic giant with a questionable stance in global communication and likeability. A Dutch foreign correspondent in Japan, Karel van Wolferen, referred to Japan as an “enigma power” (1989): “Japan perplexes the world. It has become a major world power, yet it does not behave the way most of the world expects a world power to behave; sometimes it even gives the impression of not wanting to belong to the world at all.” The Tokyo-born Harvard University professor and US Ambassador to Japan (1961-1966) Edwin O. Reischauer said about the Japanese in the 1980s: “The greatest single problem the Japanese face today is their relationship with other peoples...Japan naturally is much admired but is not naturally liked or trusted” (Reischauer, 1988). Sophia University management professor James C. Abegglen (quoted in Wood, 1988) wrote, “Japan urgently needs to change its pattern of interaction with the world, since the consequences of Japan’s past and present

February 1995. Like the original, this exhibit is divided into two parts, which represent two psychological approaches used in rallying public support for World War II.

⁶ See: <https://www.jlfc.org/activities/jet/>.

self-centered behavior are being felt...the passive, receptive role Japan still plays in the international arena is now obsolete, and the burden of change rests with Japan.”

By the late 1980s, the US referred to Japan in terms like “Japan, Inc.” or “Confucian capitalist,” and it was seen as both a competitor and ally to the United States. As Japan’s economic engines slowed in the 1990s and the country began its first “lost decade,” the government of Japan began to shift its policy focus from solely economics to culture. Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006) established the Council on Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy. In 2002, Douglas McGray published “Japan’s Gross National Cool” in *Foreign Policy* to much fanfare among the bureaucrats in Japan. Now Japan had a hook—culture power—which it thought might help it rise up from economic decline. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs merged international cultural exchange with public relations to create a new Public Diplomacy Department in 2004, and Japan was on its way to creating an infrastructure for public diplomacy and strategic communications.

International Broadcasting: The Weakest Link

It is well accepted that news and international broadcasting are major elements of public diplomacy and strategic communications. NHK is Japan’s flagship international broadcaster, but it has a very small footprint in the world, with so little global name recognition that it elected to rebrand its “NHK World” name to “NHK World-Japan.” As a public broadcaster, it models itself after the BBC, but it has increasingly been overshadowed by China’s broadcasting ventures (Snow, 2019; Kaori, 2014; Seaton, 2017; Yamamoto, 2013).

The United States is the leading country in the world in the manufacturing and management of public diplomacy and strategic communications (SC). Japan is a soft power cultural superpower, but a weaker link in presenting and managing its global story (Snow, 2020). A major contributing factor to Japan’s global communications challenges is that the country is a victim of its own economic success. As Japanologist Alex Kerr (2001, p. 348) says, “For forty years after the war, Japan was not only ‘Number One in Asia,’ it was the ‘Only One.’” A historically ‘Only One’ nation does not have a sense of urgency about mastering the dominant shared language of commerce, diplomacy, social media, and higher education. In addition, an ‘Only One’ or former ‘Only One’ with a contested history in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions will have more challenges in figuring out an audience-first

proactive narrative. Japan's policy advocacy often messages from the perspective of its own narrative, not the interests of its target audience. A case in point is the disputed islands. There is no global public caring about the Senkaku Islands, but Shinzo Abe made the disputed islands a feature of his storyline about Japan's relations in the region. Today, much time and attention is still paid to the strategic significance of the Senkaku Islands, illustrated by one of the most well-presented web pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Situation of the Senkaku Islands | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). Far right-leaning media often cover the islands, but the heat generated is for a domestic audience, not a global one (Sankei Shimbun, 2022). Alas, the time and attention paid to preparing specialized content that appeals only to one's domestic audience makes Japan's strategic communications anything but strategic.

Japan's Strategic Communications (SC) and Public Diplomacy: Strength in Personality, Not Institution

Japan is one of Asia's oldest democracies (Solis, 2021) and the strongest economic and security partner to the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. The world's second-largest democratic economy, Japan has three nuclear powers as neighbors, two of which are P5 members: China and Russia. Anything that Japan projects onto the world must be viewed in the context of a narrative brand that is well beyond *kawaii* culture or Cool Japan (Otmazgin, 2018, Snow 2021). Japan sits in a particularly dangerous neighborhood that requires frontline security from 55,000 stationed troops supplied by the world's largest military and nuclear power, the United States. This soft power/hard power neighborhood (McCarthy, 2018) is a hotbed of competing national interests and national security storylines across a continuum of democracy and authoritarianism political economy systems.

The US-Japan Alliance, the bedrock of bilateral relations, has no peer in the world, serving as the "cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region" (Chicago Council 2022). Despite the combined global financial crisis and devastating 9.0 earthquake and tsunami with nuclear fallout, known in Japan as 3/11, Japan has remained a tier-one country (in media buying and media relations, tier-one countries represent strong, established economies and correspond to the World Bank's list of high-income nations). Under Japan's longest-serving prime

minister, Shinzo Abe, Japan promised a “safe pair of hands” (Mander & Soble, 2013) to secure the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. Japan took more of the reins of responsibility in the Asia-Pacific region with a rhetorical frame that has the continuity of fifteen years, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Abe first defined FOIP at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Kenya, but it was first hatched as a Japanese take on “sea to shining sea,” the American idiom meaning “from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.” Mr. Abe referred to the “Confluence of the Two Seas” at the Parliament of the Republic of India in 2007.

Like a Japanese version of a Great Communicator Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, Abe used the bully pulpit approach to advance Japan’s global communications. He presided over the 2016 Ise-Shima Summit, after which American President Barack Obama and Shinzo Abe made historic remarks at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (The Whitehouse, 2016). In 2019, Japan was the host of the G20 Summit in Osaka, one of the last in-person gatherings of the world’s leading economies before Covid-19 struck. In a flurry of speeches at home and abroad, including an unprecedented invitation to address a joint meeting of the US Congress during the Obama Administration (PMO, 2015), Abe called on the Japanese people to feel good about Japan and its global leadership through “proactive peace” and “values-led diplomacy,” including its strong official development assistance (ODA) posture that makes it oftenthe only other country to compete with China for large infrastructure projects. Japan’s recognized leadership in overseas development assistance and its trusted Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have led to research on it as a soft power tool of public diplomacy and strategic communications (see Iwata, 2013; King, 2016).

Unlike any prime minister before him and perhaps ever to follow, Abe had the personal charisma to use his confident personality to communicate a vision of a “beautiful Japan” that projected its values and policies onto the global community. Abe was a gifted visionary leader, with many global admirers like Asia Society President and former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2022) who said that “Shinzo Abe is the most important Japanese leader in the past 50 years.” The merits of relying on a charismatic leader rest with Abe’s proactive agenda that defied Japanese negative stereotypes of passivity and inertia in decision making.

Abe was able to marshal support for institutional growth in SC as the “face” of Japan’s strategic communications. “To critics, he represented a dangerous strain of nationalist revisionism. To supporters, he was the realist visionary Japan needed in a more turbulent modern world,” *The Economist* eulogized on July 8, 2022. The drawbacks of relying on a personalized or individuated approach in SC are that once that leader is gone, there may be no one up to the job of replicating that style. A leader may adopt some of the characteristics of a charismatic leader but more often than not, as in the American presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Obama, charismatic leadership is a combination of events and personality. Abe’s weakness was that he looked backward as much as forward. His record is mixed in threading the needle of Japan’s pre-war history into the present. There were many missteps along the way, including an inability to reconcile with Japan’s pre-war history to 1945, one of war-making, occupation (Taiwan, China, Korea) and imperial ambitions that extended well beyond Asia. The carryover to today is the strong tendency for the Government of Japan—the main driver of global persuasion—to overreach in its attempt to control Japan’s narrative. Abe made some major communicative blunders, including seeking too much government intervention in Japan’s public broadcaster, NHK; attempting to erase so-called “Comfort Women” content from a popular US high school textbook; and making the rookie foul decision to visit Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 (Kolmas, 2019). For better or for worse, Brand Abe will remain the national face of Brand Japan in the twenty-first century through his extraordinary rhetorical legacy in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which has cemented US-Japan relations in democracy promotion against the rise of China and Russia. In 2022, the US and Japan must move beyond personality-driven to alliance-driven SC.

The US-Japan Alliance: The Cornerstone of Japan’s PD and SC

The US and Japan are more than allies; they are “Tomodachi.”⁷ The bond began with ignominious defeat for Japan and spoils to the victor for the United States in 1945. August 15 is known in Japan as “the day for mourning of war dead and

⁷ The TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership, born out of support for Japan’s recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake, that invests in the next generation of Japanese and American leaders through educational and cultural exchanges as well as leadership programs.

praying for peace,” Japan’s version of Memorial Day, while August 14 in the US is remembered as V-J Day (Victory over Japan) Day, although only one state, Rhode Island, still commemorates it (NPR, 2021).

Two years after World War II ended and during the seven-year American Occupation of Japan (1947-1952), the United States drafted Japan’s Post-War Constitution, also known as the Peace Constitution or MacArthur Constitution. Staff of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) General Douglas MacArthur wrote the draft and allowed Japanese legal scholars to review and modify the democratic cornerstone with final approval by the emperor of Japan whose sovereignty was ceded to the people of Japan by becoming a non-sacred symbol of the state and unity among its people (Moritsugu, 2016; Richter, 2016). At 5,000 words with 103 articles,⁸ it is one of the shortest Constitutions and “is the oldest, unamended constitution in the world today” (McElwain, 2017). The pacifism clause Article 9 is its most famous passage, which the US included so that Japan would never again aspire to be an imperial war state. With Shinzo Abe’s passing, Article 9 and Constitutional Revisionism are likely to become more prominently discussed as part of Japan’s national identity and image projected onto the world (Kelly and Toyoda, 2022; Siow, 2022). The push for updating Japan’s Constitution has been decades in the making, along with calls for UN Security Council membership and military deployment to allow Japan to assume more control over its security beyond the US umbrella. These policy advocacies position Japan, at least in its aspirations, as a great power (Kelly, 2007).

Japan’s Main Competitor: China’s Global Media Outreach

China’s global rise is a well-told story. Google it and you get 595 million results. Google the US-Japan Alliance and you get one-fifth that number, 107 million. As of September 15, 2022, the English-language China Global Television Network (<https://twitter.com/cgtnofficial>) had 13.2 million Twitter followers, while its competitor NHK World News (https://www.twitter.com/NHKWORLD_news) had 155,000 followers. While Japan continues to do PowerPoint presentations to advocate its position on the Russian war in Ukraine or Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s Realism Diplomacy, China is unleashing a new generation of “wolf warriors” and

⁸ The Constitution of Japan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

civilian “netizens” who fearlessly and aggressively defend China’s policies online (Martin, 2021). The Twitter account of Zhao Lijian ([@zlj517](#)), Deputy Director-General of the Information Department of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrates the aggressive China approach to that of its seemingly stiff and boring neighbor. It is unthinkable to imagine Japan training its government officials to assert themselves through social media. It’s too risky a venture and not in keeping with Japan’s diplomatic posture of restraint and reserve. China views risk differently. It frees up its officials to gain followers with the attitude that any publicity is better than none at all. China’s government spokespeople and diplomats enjoy celebrity status, while Japan’s exist almost without notice. Zhao is the most famous of the wolf warrior breed of diplomats with 1.8 million Twitter followers, while the Prime Minister of Japan’s English Twitter account has 268,800 followers.

China approaches its global communications as a national security priority and unity in purpose domestic practice. Every elite person, especially the large number of China’s best and brightest civilians who engage in study abroad in record numbers, sees themselves along a continuum from information warriors to defenders or explainers of China’s foreign policy, people, and nation. It is baked into their upbringing without the need of top-down enforcement. If they are labeled propagandists, then so be it, because propaganda is just information in service to the nation-state. In contrast, a Japanese student on study abroad, much less an American or European student, would not likely view an overseas study experience as a contributing factor to the national interests, much less national security goals, of one’s native country. But it is in China. Research by Brady (2017) on China’s influence in New Zealand concludes that the CCP, in its relationship to overseas Chinese, including students, does not want to be seen as leading them but rather guiding: “The goal of successful overseas Chinese work is to get the community to proactively and even better, spontaneously, engage in activities which enhance China’s foreign policy agenda.” Likewise, a report on Chinese influence activities in the United States by Diamond and Schell (2019, xii) for Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, concluded that the People’s Republic of China “united front” influence bureaucracy views the Chinese diaspora as “overseas compatriots,” who owe a measure of loyalty to “the Chinese Motherland.”

So long as free and open societies like the US and Japan continue to view the international exchange of persons as more of a resume enhancer and individual life changer, then China will continue to have an enormous advantage over its great

power competitors. We may not agree with China's wolf warrior foreign policy or its autocratic regime, but we fail ourselves if we too quickly dismiss the wolf warrior phenomenon as over-the-top. When we do, we forget that most of the developing world, including countries in Southeast Asia, are seated in a spectator stand with no interest or involvement in the US-China showdown. Harvard University sociologist Ezra Vogel, a favorite son of China and Japan, makes this clear in his final book before his death in 2020, *China and Japan: Facing History* (2019). Vogel explains that what has influenced China's national identity, and what likely drives its defensive to aggressive foreign relations communications today, is a sense of victimization suffered at the hands of others, especially Japan. Martin (2021) explains the rise of China's civilian information warriors on TikTok and other social media platforms in the same light—to overcome a sense of indignity and dehumanization—along with Chinese diplomats who have a mandate from Xi to use all of the communication tools available to tell China's story to the world. As Xi sees it, "The amount of information controlled has become an important indicator of a nation's soft power and competitiveness" (Smith, 2021), which is why Xi called on China in May 2021 to build its own R&D strategic communications with "distinctive" Chinese characteristics (Isisa, 2021).

Japan talks about a seamless approach to strategic communications (SC), but its SC is hidden from view, embedded in its military sector. China's strategic communications are public and operate across multiple platforms, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS countries, and the China Media Group. As noted in a study on China's international broadcasting, "China's state media has been pragmatically deployed as an instrument for international propaganda, as part of China's soft power initiative in its pursuit of an improved global image" (Zhu, 2022). It is my experience with teaching in China and Japan that the Chinese are much more adept at studying the way that others think. Japan, known for its contemplative, consensus and methodical approach to decision making, does not utilize the way that others think in a pragmatic sense like the Chinese. For example, when I first taught at Tsinghua University in 2007, I was invited to present lectures to state government officials and students about how to work effectively with Western media. This was on the precipice of the Beijing Summer Olympics. In contrast, the Japanese approach to global media is to pay fees to both Japanese and international public relations firms for guidance and largely ignore the expertise and insight of non-Japanese thought leaders.

China's strategic communications will continue to rise in volume and breadth, and as it does, so should the story of the ties that bind the United States and Japan be told at a higher volume and with broader reach and depth. Abe's greatest legacy in strategic communications is that he left democratic partner countries with a strategic roadmap for more cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. China will push back on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, but we should expect that, because an alternative vision in China's backyard is exactly what China does not want. As Mazarr et al (2022) note in a recent RAND report, challenger nations like China and Russia "are determined to claim greater international influence and reduce US power—and, in China's case, become the preeminent power in Asia." Right now, we do not see enough of a concerted effort being made by Japan's "Sakura warriors" in the international influence sphere to balance a power grab by China which, if it succeeds, will not only reduce US power but also place Japan in its most vulnerable position since the end of WWII.

Conclusion

Japan echoes the US model in strategic communications (SC) by emphasizing national self-interest and self-help first, partnership with its closest bilateral ally second, and the global agenda third. Its greatest complement to US SC is a shared philosophy about joining efforts to counter China's rise as a unilateral hegemon in Greater Asia, as well as countering the influence of other authoritarian powers. As noted in a Brookings article on Japan's democratic renewal, "even though Washington and Tokyo have not historically aligned on a strategy of democracy promotion, they can coordinate efforts to ensure democratic resilience and the survival of the liberal order" (Mireya Solis, 2021). The challenge will be around how Japan to a greater degree and the US to a lesser degree can overcome the lack of public interest and engagement in global security matters. The world's attention is moving away from Russia's war in Ukraine to worries about a global recession. Publics are not amenable to higher military expenditures related to SC or even upticks in public diplomacy (PD) budgets when their own bank account balances are dwindling.

According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey of 17 advanced economies, the US is acknowledged widely around the world for its military strength, higher education institutions, technology and entertainment sectors—a combined hard and soft power projection. Japan is renowned exclusively for its cultural superpower

projection in the arts, architecture, cuisine, temple traditions, and craftsmanship, along with its well-known J-pop fantasy culture in manga, anime, and video games. Until and unless Japan has a more open national conversation about how public it wants to make its military and defense sector, SC will play second fiddle to PD. Even the Prime Minister of Japan from Hiroshima is hedging his bets, between advocacy for ridding the world of nuclear weapons and promoting a realism diplomacy that calls for a doubling of the defense budget and support for NATO deterrence backed by force. The 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security in Japan expanded its Self Defense Forces' global response to "Survival-Threatening Situations" and "Situations that Will Have an Important Influence." Japan's strong defense posture, buttressed by a growing seamless defense posture to international crises, will be an ongoing conundrum for the Japanese people to reconcile with their peace-loving, pacifistic posture that contrasts to that of the United States.

Japan's PD is more unique, due to the Nihonjinron model of Japanese exceptionalism with its cultural contrast to the West and North America. It employs soft-sell tactics to promote its global image; these include its world-renowned cuisine, traditional, and modern culture, and a reputation for being a nice, pleasant, clean and safe place to visit at the top of a traveler's bucket list. Japan's PD does not have much of any overlap with its SC—unlike the US, which utilizes a toolkit integrating public affairs (PA) with psychological operations (PSYOP) and public diplomacy. In the unique case of Japan, it is difficult to integrate a soft power tool like "Cool Japan," with its focus on cultural and exchange diplomacy, into strategic communications that are exclusively associated with the Ministry of Defense and Japan's Self Defense Forces. The prowess of the Japanese military sector (among the top ten in the world) is relatively unknown and not discussed among the Japanese. "Cool Japan" does not wear a uniform. Even the word "military" is avoided in polite conversation, so as not to ruffle the widely accepted image of Japan as a pacifist nation. This lack of acknowledgement means that there is no domestic constituency from which to advocate for more funding or legislative changes. The US has no issue with public awareness of its military, and its PD agenda has a much larger footprint in the academy, where both public relations and public diplomacy have a strong research and training agenda. Japan has no public relations or public diplomacy programs in higher education, only a few courses here and there. To note, I was the first full-time public diplomacy professor appointed to a Japanese university.

Japan is much more elite-driven in its SC/PD than the egalitarian model of the US. The US military sector, where SC dominates, has a heavy focus on diversity and inclusion. D&I initiatives are at the beginning stage in Japan and are more prevalent in international than domestic sectors. The US does a much better job with networking and outreach from the government to the public. The Japan model narrow casts and works with a select few who speak on behalf of Japan, the so-called Japan hands. How does this impact Japan's SC/PD? It makes it less creative, more constrained by consensus-driven approaches and makes it function more like an echo chamber.

In addition to a fiscal crisis of stagnant wages and a weakened yen, Japan is wrestling with a domestic crisis, the Abe Legacy vs. Unitarian Church controversy, that has eroded support for the Kishida administration. As stated earlier, Japan's SC profile is driven by domestic politics and the domestic economy. If the Prime Minister of Japan cannot manage to handle this internal crisis, this will make not only his global agenda difficult but also strengthening and broadening SC more challenging. So long as Japan associates SC with the defense sector, then the public will remain marginalized from forming a better understanding and support for its role in helping to shape Japan's regional and global priorities.

Looking Forward: Strengthen US-Japan SC/PD Coordination

I would primarily recommend that the US play to its existing strengths in Japan, including the US-Japan Alliance, and work closer with the PD sector to initiate more content that informs, engages and influences about the importance of preserving and strengthening these bilateral ties. Secondly, the US should invite more collaboration and involvement of its strategic partners in the region, such as Australia, India, and Japan, to capitalize on the goodwill extended to Japan following Abe's assassination. Programming should emphasize the need to create a counterbalance to China's military and economic strength in the FOIP region, as a consequence of economic and security measures that have a demonstrable common good. South Korea and Japan should seek closer integration of purpose in PD/SC strategies where win-win outcomes are possible, avoiding pitfalls into historical debates that detract from larger issues at hand.

Japan's responsibilities in public diplomacy have only intensified since I published a white paper on the topic of Japan's public diplomacy for the French Institute of International Relations (Snow, February 2016). Northeast Asia is a much more complicated region to navigate despite strong economic interdependence. China still remains Japan's top trading partner. Democratic and authoritarian states are jockeying for influence in the great power competition era. In the immediate aftermath of Abe's assassination, Japan will likely build up a reservoir of goodwill and sympathy. But during the Abe years, Japan had to balance its image between the Cool Japan brand, full of cute idols, anime and pop music (Otmazgin, 2018), and a darker portrait, of a revisionist, ultra-nationalist Japan that sought to normalize its military status and reinterpret in a rosier view its war history (Patrick, 2022). Today, Japan has yet to develop efficient tools to communicate with the world. If Shinzo Abe were successful in giving a new impetus to develop a truly global public diplomacy and new tools and narratives, his legacy is still mixed. Therefore, Japan must not only welcome the best aspects of the Abe Legacy but also go beyond the political personality of Abe to promote its public diplomacy and strategic communications in a systemic, research-driven, active-listening manner. Abe's powerful appeal casts a large shadow on Japanese society, but Japan needs to train the next generation of Japanese spokespeople and trainers in effective and critical communication, in order to take on the challenges of narrative competition among great powers. If Japan cannot tell its own story, it will leave a vacuum for others to fill—namely China and Russia. It should expand skills in strategic communications and public diplomacy studies in higher education. The July 2022 announcement from the University of Tokyo, about the country's first research and education lab in strategic communications, is an important first step in linking the academy with the government and military/defense sectors, but this will likely take some time to build up to the level of a department or degree program (University of Tokyo, 2022). Nevertheless, it is a hopeful sign that Japan is taking international political communication seriously. Finally, PD and SC should target not only foreign governments but also foreign publics. Japan tends to seek the influence of elites only, and it often misses out on how to influence mass publics. Japan has such a reservoir of goodwill now with the world that global publics will be eager to not only visit the country in person, but also hear many more stories about the everyday lives of the Japanese people. Japan's greatest natural resource remains its people, and their time is now to engage with the world.

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Background Research Gates Forum I

(Re)investing in Our Reputational Security: Alternative Models and Options Strengthen U.S. Strategic Communications

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AidData | Global Research Institute | William & Mary

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1. Introduction: Why Is Now the Time to Invest in Reputational Security?

Strategic communications is fundamental to national security. A state's reputation—how it is perceived internationally—affects its ability to mobilize allies, convince skeptics, and counter the narratives of those who seek to undermine it (Cull, 2022). Reputation is not determined solely by what a state says, but also what it does and how it builds common cause with foreign publics. Those that seek to dilute and diminish America's global leadership have internalized this lesson to great effect, taking the offensive in deploying various tools and tactics to undercut our reputational security. The United States can also be its own worst enemy for failing to invest in our core capabilities to amplify preferred messages, cultivate shared norms, and forge common bonds with foreign counterparts to advance mutual interests. We have let our capabilities atrophy at a time when we need them most to successfully compete and win what the 2022 National Security Strategy argues is "a contest for the future of our world" (NSS, 2022).

This paper aims to answer three critical questions to inform discussion, debate, and deliberation about a roadmap to reinvest in America's reputational security:

- What are the consistent pain points in U.S. strategic communications practice?
- What would success look like if our strategic communications was fit-for-purpose?
- How can we do better to reinvest in strategic communications that advances U.S. goals?

The aim of this piece is not to provide a single silver bullet or pre-baked, all-in-one solution. The purpose of the Gates Forum is to work towards a common sense, nonpartisan roadmap that lays out a series of building blocks to reimagine, rebuild, and reinvest in the U.S. strategic communications toolkit in ways that safeguards America's reputational security. This paper provides a menu of possible, though non-exhaustive, options for conferees to consider for inclusion in such a roadmap. Many of the options presented are not mutually exclusive and could be pursued as part of a unified set of interlocking recommendations. In other cases, choosing a particular pathway may close the door to others.

The assessment and reform options articulated in this paper draw inspiration from several sources. They triangulate insights from across the six companion background papers for the Gates Forum on America’s past and present practice of strategic communications, as well as comparative looks at the approaches used by one of our closest allies, Japan, and two of our fiercest competitors, Russia and the PRC. They incorporate ideas from a series of background interviews conducted with scholars, practitioners, and leaders in U.S. strategic communications across the public and private sectors. They also integrate lessons learned and approaches from past reform efforts proposed or attempted within strategic communications, as well as in other facets of U.S. foreign policy, including but not limited to PEPFAR.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces six critical pain points to describe the distance between the current reality and our desired future for strategic communications. Section 3 identifies a range of possible options for consideration to address these pain points and strengthen U.S. strategic communications in future, along with a discussion of pros and cons.

2. Current Reality Versus Desired Future: What Are the Pain Points?

This section provides an overview of six pain points that hamper U.S. strategic communications in ways that undermine America’s reputational security. These pain points are as follows: (i) lack of political and technical leadership; (ii) insufficient resources and poor prioritization; (iii) toothless coordination across diffuse operations; (iv) broken feedback loops between supply and demand; (v) going it alone, rather than crowding in support from partners and allies; (vi) navigating a multipolar world replete with new opportunities and challenges. Each pain point includes a brief articulation of the gap between the current reality of U.S. strategic communications versus the desired future. These pain points will become the foundation for potential options in section 3.

2.1 A Lack of Political and Technical Leadership

“Committed leadership” is an essential ingredient that can make or break a reform effort (Allas et al., 2018). Senior leaders are needed to articulate and communicate a compelling vision for change, marshal the human and financial resources to see that

vision become reality, and hold all parties accountable for results. In this vein, America's strategic communications has been strongest when senior White House and congressional leaders are interested in its success, can articulate how it advances U.S. foreign policy goals and national interests, and follow through in endowing capable deputies with authorities, resources, and access to operationalize this vision in day-to-day operations.

Conversely, strategic communications efforts falter when these critical ingredients are missing, as they have been for much of U.S. history. Effective partnerships between presidents and the deputies charged with implementing America's broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been more the exception than the rule. This lack of unified vision creates a vacuum that is quickly filled by turf wars over mandates, competition for scarce resources, and disjointed activities that may or may not align with a strategic purpose. Moreover, the lack of representation of strategic communications within national security and foreign policy decision-making increases the vulnerability of a disconnect between what America says with its broadcasting and public diplomacy on the one hand and what it does in policy and practice on the other.

2.2 Insufficient Resources With Poor Prioritization

Resources tend to flow to vision. In the absence of that clear and compelling vision, they do one of two things—flow elsewhere or revert to a state of inertia. Both of these outcomes have occurred with regard to U.S. strategic communications. Financing levels have continually declined over the last several decades as a share of the overall international affairs budget and overall federal discretionary spending, even as priorities have become more diffuse and competitors more assertive. In the absence of clear goals for strategic communications to advance America's national security interests, there is little accountability to ensure resources are being allocated in ways that reward results and innovation, rather than succumbing to the path of least resistance: continuing to fund what we have done before, without consideration of whether we are making the best use of the limited funds available.

If we prioritize everything, we effectively prioritize nothing, and herein lies a critical challenge facing U.S. strategic communications today. With the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategic communications was pulled in various directions, expected to speak to an

ever expanding set of geographies and topical areas, even while working within increasingly constrained resources. This strategic ambiguity has several cascading effects. Rather than focusing on measurable and achievable objectives, America's broadcasting and public diplomacy programs are expected to be all things to all people. There is a lack of clarity on what success looks like, which makes it difficult to measure results and make course corrections—thereby perpetuating the status quo, whether it is working or not. This also creates perverse incentives at the agency and sub-agency levels, as there is little perceived value in learning from failures and scaling up successes, because resourcing is not tied to results.

2.3 Toothless Coordination Across Diffuse Operations

The landscape of U.S. strategic communications today is one of many actors with disparate mandates, situated across siloed agencies and bureaus with minimal incentive to work together. In the absence of empowered senior leadership, at best America's broadcasting and public diplomacy functions are merely the sum of their parts, rather than force multipliers. At worst, they may even devolve into working at cross-purposes that can result in "information fratricide" (Tomlin, 2020), inadvertently impeding or undercutting the efforts of a sister agency due to a lack of prior planning.

Administrations have made various ad hoc attempts to create committees or positions to coordinate across the interagency. However, these efforts are often short-lived and ineffective, plagued by the fact that these coordination vehicles seldom have adequate authority to incentivize participation and enforce compliance from agencies and entities that have their own parochial interests to protect. As a result, these coordination efforts became less ambitious in their expectations, resorting to coordinating at the level of talking points rather than tackling systemic challenges, pursuing joint opportunities, and codifying lessons learned. A "committee of equals" cannot remedy this status quo (Paul, 2009) without a lead voice which has the authority to pull various levers of power to establish priorities, assign responsibilities, allocate funds, enforce compliance, reward results, and penalize poor performance.

2.4 A Broken Feedback Loop between Supply and Demand

At the end of the day, U.S. strategic communications is only as successful as its ability to change the attitudes or behaviors of foreign publics and leaders in ways that advance America's national interests. This is easier said than done, since we have more control over the supply-side inputs (i.e., number of broadcasting hours, number of exchange program participants) than how target audiences respond. U.S. strategic communications has been at its strongest when we have put in the spadework to practice "strategic empathy" (Grover, 2016)—continuously listening to understand where an audience is coming from, drawing connections between what they value and what we care about, and combining the push of messaging with the pull of relationship-building to close the gap and advance our interests.

In contrast, America's worst failures have relied on slick marketing campaigns and tone deaf self-promotion, divorced from ground-level insights of who we are speaking to, how our messages are received, and the myriad factors that play into the ways in which we are ultimately perceived. To reduce the risk that our strategic communications falls short of its aspirations, we need a combination of key ingredients which the U.S. has unfortunately let atrophy and needs to rebuild: (i) a pipeline of culturally savvy, internationally curious, and emotionally intelligent communicators to work in and outside of government; (ii) the capacity to conduct deep analysis of target audiences; and (iii) the ability to systematically test, measure, and monitor responses to our broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts.

2.5 Going It Alone, Versus Crowding in Support From Allies and Partners

One of America's unique strengths is the vibrancy of a free and open society with all of its messiness. Universities, private sector companies, non-government media outlets, celebrities, and civic groups are unpredictable, but as they engage with foreign publics and leaders, they become part of U.S. strategic communications efforts, whether planned or not. Rather than trying to control or constrain these efforts, America's strategic communications efforts will be stronger if we are able to mobilize and partner with these actors to crowd-in their expertise, support, and operational capacity in areas of common interest. Yet, legislative restrictions inhibit America's ability to cultivate a

strong domestic constituency to advance U.S. reputational security. A 1972 revision to the Smith-Mundt Act (with the good intention of protecting the American people from being propagandized by their own government) separated foreign and domestic strategic communications, but with the unintended consequence of hurting the ability of the agencies tasked with these activities from engaging with the U.S. public to build their awareness, leverage their capabilities, and ensure that the government's efforts are transparent and accountable.

A second unique strength of America is our close partnerships with allies that share many of our values, including fellow democracies interested in protecting free and open societies and alumni networks of past U.S. public diplomacy programs who have come to appreciate and value good relations with the United States. Nevertheless, when it comes to U.S. strategic communications—from broadcasting to public diplomacy—America more often goes it alone, rather than intentionally pooling resources with allies. This short-sightedness makes it difficult to share the cost of producing and distributing broadcasting content that advances shared values, builds resilience among societies to maintain a plurality of views, and identifies and counters disinformation. If the value proposition of U.S. exchange programs is to build relationships and mutual understanding that lasts generations, but we do not effectively mobilize alumni long after their participation in these programs, then America is not being a good steward of these resources.

2.6 Navigating a Time of Unprecedented Threats and Opportunities

The world in 2022 is a time of great threats and opportunities for U.S. reputational security. America faces highly “capable competitors” for global influence (Brandt, 2022), as Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) wield expansive state-directed strategic communications efforts, sometimes in ways that run counter to the interests of the United States and other target audiences. In addition to traditional broadcasting and in-person public diplomacy, the rise of new technologies (e.g., Internet, artificial intelligence) and platforms (e.g., smartphones, streaming services, social media) has dramatically altered how citizens and leaders source information, share their views, and form narratives about themselves, others, and the world around them. This creates unprecedented opportunities to reduce the time, cost, and distance it takes to communicate with people nearly anywhere, anytime, and in multiple ways.

Rather than in one-to-one or one-to-many relationships, the reality of how narratives are formed and spread is increasingly in the realm of many-to-many relationships with those you may never have met in person. But this hyperconnectivity comes with new vulnerabilities to surveillance, censorship, disinformation, and manipulation that can corrode personal freedoms and disrupt entire societies.

Navigating this brave new world of digital threats and opportunities requires an agility and sophistication that U.S. strategic communications often lacks. It requires the development of offensive communications to effectively adopt and exploit a range of new communications channels and tactics to tell America's story that present high-risk, high-reward opportunities. When they work, they do so in a big way, but the potential for blowback is arguably higher than with conventional communications. In parallel, defensive communications are also needed to continuously monitor, anticipate, and respond to threats that seek to compromise America's reputation and the health of our information ecosystem, as well as pose risks to the rights of individuals and the functioning of societies around the world.

While our competitors have demonstrated an enthusiasm and adeptness for quickly turning the digital world to their advantage, the United States has been slow to adapt. Until recently, U.S. public diplomacy professionals were operating within organizational structures and job descriptions designed for the analog world of the Cold War rather than the digital world we now live in today—never mind preparing for new innovations tomorrow. We continue to invest heavily and resist reductions in areas such as short-wave radio consumption, which is declining in most parts of the world. Much of the dynamism of digital communications is with private sector companies and civil society actors, but the U.S. government often has limited incentive to partner effectively or lacks the resources and authorities to do so.

3. Reform Options: How Can We Do Better?

This section proposes a menu of options for Gates Forum conferees' consideration as you develop a roadmap to strengthen U.S. strategic communications in ways that safeguard America's reputational security for decades to come. The options presented reflect different ways in which the U.S. might address the six pain points identified in Section 2. For ease of consideration, the options are organized into two buckets: (i) structural changes to improve leadership, coordination, and/or capacity; and (ii) operational changes to increase coherence, alignment, and results.

Each option includes a brief articulation of the idea, along with a discussion of pros and cons. In some instances, there is also a context-setting piece to describe the source of inspiration, whether that is previous legislation or a policy tried in one setting that could be adapted and applied to the realm of strategic communications. The ordering of options within each bucket does not reflect a relative preference or the merits of these ideas, but rather the likely level of difficulty in execution from least to greatest.

3.1 Structural Changes to Improve Leadership, Coordination and/or Capacity

Option 3.1.1 Create a new White House policy "czar" or "envoy" with the authority and resources to take a comprehensive approach to strengthening U.S. reputational security from various angles.

One of the great challenges in safeguarding America's reputational security is the fact that there are various factors that feed into how the U.S. is perceived by foreign publics. These include foreign policy matters, domestic social issues, government communications, the actions of private and civil society actors with other countries, and the narratives our competitors (e.g., PRC, Russia) promote about themselves and the U.S., among other considerations. Government agencies have defined mandates and authorities that assign them to a particular lane to focus their attention, but this can have the unintended byproduct of myopia that limits the understanding and solving of the problem at hand to a specific agency, rather than the problem being something that cuts across neat boundaries. Creating a new presidentially-appointed policy "czar" or "envoy" for reputational security could help the U.S. think comprehensively and

systematically about the problem we need to solve, beyond artificial agency or issue boundaries, and take the long view on solutions.

The inspiration for this approach is the use of policy czars or special presidential envoys by past administrations to tackle issues as varied as energy, climate, cybersecurity, and drug control. A presidential policy czar or special envoy has a broad mandate to look at an issue comprehensively but is often in a more time-limited role. Since they lack the resources of a large agency, they must instead push forward policy change by collaboratively working with and across myriad government agencies, White House committees, and Congress. In their favor, a policy czar or envoy typically has the ear and imprimatur of the President to think differently, work nimbly across organizational boundaries and issue areas, and convene people in ways that help tackle complex problems. President Joe Biden elevated his Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, to have a seat at the table where national security decisions were made as a member of the Principals Committee of the National Security Council.

The Special Envoy for U.S Reputational Security would be a presidentially-appointed Cabinet-level position dedicated to leading the administration's efforts to improve foreign public perceptions of the United States as a preferred partner, responsible global leader, dependable ally, and model democracy. The envoy would be supported by a small support Office of Reputational Security with a working budget and staff, though on a smaller scale than an agency or sub-agency. The envoy would be tasked with developing a multi-faceted strategic communications plan that is responsive to the 2022 National Security Strategy, with input from relevant leaders across the interagency and Congress, as well as marshaling resources and partners to implement said strategy, reporting on progress to the President.

Pros: This approach would require the least structural change, in that it does not require the restructuring or creation of new agencies or sub-agencies, nor does it require changes in congressional appropriations. Yet, it would still tackle the challenge of incorporating strategic communications within national security and foreign policy decision-making, particularly if the role was given a seat on the National Security Council. It would send a strong signal that strategic communications is a Presidential priority and tap a trusted confidant, who is less concerned with an agency's parochial interests than in advancing the President's agenda, with the responsibility to see that interagency coordination happens. Moreover, the position would have a close working

relationship to elevate strategic communications' considerations for the President's ears, which in past history we have seen as critically important to success.

Cons: The use of policy czars and envoys is controversial because they are presidentially-appointed but not Senate-confirmed positions, raising concerns about accountability. For example, there was resistance to several of President Barack Obama's czars as hiding behind "executive privilege" and being less willing to work with and testify before congressional committees (Saiger, 2011; Schambra, 2009). A policy czar or presidential envoy will only be as effective as their ability to wield levers of influence to convince standing government agencies, private sector actors, and Congress to work towards common goals. However, without the resources and authorities of a standing government agency or the political credibility of a Senate-confirmed position, this is more difficult to do. Instead, a czar or envoy relies more on intangibles—the extent to which the individual is seen as having the backing and ear of the President and the combination of professional will and personal charisma to exude a convening power that brings people together. At the end of the day, the enduring value of these roles comes down to what they can get incorporated into agency-level policies, executive branch directives, or congressional legislation.

Option 3.1.2 Create an "PEPFAR-like" Office of the Global Coordinator of U.S. Reputational Security at the State Department.

Greater coordination is needed, but the lessons of history show us that without endowing those doing the coordinating with the necessary resources, authorities, and access to incentivize action, they will not succeed. The creation of a new Office of the Global Coordinator for U.S. Reputational Security—reporting directly to the Secretary of State with the seal of approval of the President and vested with substantial resources and far-reaching authorities by Congress—could drive innovation, improve coordination, and provide leadership to fill a long-standing void (Brown, 2022).

The inspiration for this approach would be the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, who heads up the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to which Congress appropriates the bulk of global HIV/AIDS funding for distribution of funds among U.S. federal agencies and multilateral partners like the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. The Coordinator position was established in 2003, with the passage of the U.S. Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act, and

reauthorized multiple times with the 2008 Lantos-Hyde Act, the 2013 Stewardship Act, and the 2018 PEPFAR Extension Act. Recognizing the breadth of the strategic challenge presented by the spread of HIV/AIDS across so many parts of the world, the initial design of the Coordinator position and the broader office took cues from the command structures of anti-terrorism task forces and USCENTCOM to work nimbly and with authority to deploy resources quickly across large geographies and with myriad partners (Brown, 2022).

This proposal would not replace the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs position which provides oversight and direction for much of the department's strategic communications apparatus (e.g., the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, the Bureau of Global Public Affairs, the Expo Unit, the Global Engagement Center, the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources, and the U.S. Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy). Instead, the Office of the Global Coordinator for U.S. Reputational Security would be created as a "seventh floor entity"—positioned alongside other offices and representatives dedicated to agency priorities and the policy planning staff—to elevate the importance of strategic communications, both at the State Department (DoS) and within interagency discussions (Brown, 2022).

The Coordinator would provide a crucial leadership role in drawing connections and setting priorities for how broadcasting and public diplomacy should advance core U.S. national security interests and foreign policy goals, marshaling resources and political support to make that happen. Congress and the executive branch could continue to make direct appropriations to existing strategic communications infrastructure through the annual appropriations process, but channel new growth (financial and human resources) into the Office of the Coordinator.

Pros: This approach would tackle the interagency coordination challenge head-on by investing those charged with coordinating these efforts with the resources and authorities to incentivize participation and ensure compliance across agencies and departments to row in the same direction. The positioning of the Coordinator and support office directly under the Secretary of State gives greater voice to strategic communications within our foreign policy decision-making. Tying congressional appropriations to measurable outcomes, rather than inputs or tactics, sends a strong

signal across the interagency that the U.S. will assess performance based upon results rather than activities.

Cons: Creating a new Coordinator position and support office takes time and resources to design and stand-up before seeing results. If the Coordinator is not endowed with sufficient resources or authorities to incentivize agencies, bureaus, and departments to work in the same direction, this could end up creating another layer of bureaucracy without netting an improvement in results. Moreover, this change could provoke substantial resistance among existing players that could derail reform processes.

Option 3.1.3 Integrate disparate functions under one “USAID-like” sub-agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy that is under the DoS but with a seat on the NSC principals committee.

The U.S. has a proliferation of agencies, bureaus, and departments working on various facets of strategic communications. The sheer number of players and the degree to which these efforts are fragmented and siloed between organizational boundaries exacerbates the problem of interagency coordination, leading to duplication of efforts and the risk that disparate activities may work at cross purposes from one another. The creation of a sub-agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy, with a strong Administrator charged with communicating and building relationships with foreign publics under the oversight of the DoS, could help remedy this by integrating broadcasting, media engagement, and public diplomacy activities under one organizational banner, pursuing synergies and efficiencies across the portfolio. The sub-agency Administrator would become a permanent member of the U.S. National Security Council to ensure strategic communications has a consistent voice in key foreign policy decision-making. Ideally, this would be at the level of the Principals Committee, with the fallback option of the Deputies Committee.

The inspiration for this approach would be the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which operates as a distinct agency with its own congressional appropriation but has been under the oversight of the Secretary of State since the 1998 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act (DoS, 1997-2001). The partnership, though imperfect, allows USAID and the DoS to each focus on their distinct but complementary missions of development and diplomacy, respectively (Pramanik, 2017). Another differentiating factor between the two agencies has been that the DoS’ core mission is

to facilitate state-to-state relations in ways that advance America's interests, with foreign publics as a secondary consideration, while USAID's vantage point is more often focused on promoting economic growth, wellbeing, and security for entire populations (ibid). In fact, one of the arguments raised in opposition to attempts to fully integrate USAID into the DoS was the concern that the development mission would be subsumed under diplomacy to the point that the former would be lost in the shuffle (Ingram, 2018; Pramanik, 2017). There is precedent for the USAID Administrator to be included in both the NSC Deputies Committee (mandated by President Donald Trump in 2017) and Principals Committee (mandated by President Joe Biden in 2021).

This proposal would seek to strengthen U.S. abilities to broker both effective state-to-state relationships (traditional diplomacy) and relationships with foreign publics (broadcasting and public diplomacy) by charging these responsibilities to different agencies—the former to the DoS and the latter to a new agency for whom engaging foreign publics is its primary, not secondary, purpose. Recognizing that our broadcasting and public diplomacy should be well aligned with and support America's broader foreign policy goals, this new agency would be placed under the oversight of the DoS. In practice, this would require rebalancing mandates and redistributing resources, such that the new agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy would subsume the following programs: the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance; the U.S. Agency for Global Media and its stable of broadcasters; the DoS Global Engagement Center and Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs; and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, among others.

Pros: This approach would tackle the interagency coordination challenge by consolidating strategic communications functions related to foreign publics within one agency, ensuring alignment with U.S. foreign policy goals primarily through oversight by DoS. It would resolve a current dilemma whereby the senior DoS official working on issues of public information and public diplomacy (the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs) has limited ability to direct human and financial resources for public diplomacy, which are instead embedded within regional and country missions. Compared to the status quo, where practitioners of public information and public diplomacy often lack the professional development and career advancement opportunities enjoyed by their peers in other specialties, this restructuring would

elevate their importance and allow for more specialized human resources systems to recruit, train, manage, and advance these critical strategic communicators. Congress could directly appropriate funding for core strategic communications competencies related to broadcasting, media cooperation, and public diplomacy to ensure they are adequately funded in line with their importance to America's reputational security. Appropriations could be targeted towards outcomes, rather than inputs or tactics, with future funding based on results. Finally, the elevation of the Administrator of the new agency to have a permanent seat on the NSC would ensure that strategic communications considerations and expertise are represented in our national security decision-making at the highest levels.

Cons: The relationship between USAID and the DoS is imperfect, with "tensions over jurisdiction" and the "respective roles of the two agencies" more acute in Washington, as opposed to at overseas posts (Ingram, 2018). This could very well happen in the case of a new sub-agency for Global Engagement and Public Diplomacy under the purview of the DoS, creating new interagency coordination headaches, adding friction to operations, and decreasing the visibility of strategic communications in senior-level decision-making. For example, there have been past episodes where the DoS has purposefully delayed funding for USAID field missions, displaced USAID's role in leading humanitarian response in Haiti, and interfered in USAID's ability to speak clearly on issues related to the role of development within broader foreign policy (Ingram, 2018). These risks would be alleviated if Congress incorporated protections within the new agency's mandate to mitigate the risk of interference from the DoS in how it discharges its budget and clearly demarcates the missions and mandates of the actors. The Executive branch could further ensure that the new agency has an independent voice in national security decision-making through extending a permanent seat for the Administrator on the NSC. There could also be merit to institutionalizing a standard practice of staff secondments to promote interagency understanding between the DoS and the new agency, "as is mandated in the military services under the Goldwater-Nichols law" (ibid).

Option 3.1.4 Establish an independent “MCC-like” agency as a center of excellence to do strategic communications differently, focused on tangible results, local partnerships, and clear priorities.

Trying to do things differently within an existing organizational culture requires navigating active and passive resistance that can stymie and derail reforms. The creation of a new government agency offers a clean slate to try to do strategic communications differently—setting out clear prioritization measures to identify a subset of priority countries for investment rather than trying to work everywhere; embracing co-creation with local partners in the target countries to work on time-limited projects of mutual interest rather than those designed solely in Washington; and adhering to rigorous and transparent metrics to screen, monitor, and evaluate projects.

The inspiration for this approach could be the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), adapted to fit the needs and context of strategic communications. The MCC was established in 2004, with the passage of the 2003 Millennium Challenge Act. The intent was to create a government entity apart from the Departments of State and Treasury, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development. It was envisioned as an opportunity to do aid differently: (i) using third-party performance measures to identify potential candidate countries, with a reasonable expectation that U.S. taxpayer dollars could be put to good use; (ii) requiring partner countries to lead the process of designing and implementing time-limited projects in response to local partners, rather than earmarks or directives from Washington; and (iii) screening projects using cost-benefit analyses and assessing results with rigorous evaluations (Parks, 2019).

The MCC is a “wholly-owned corporation” headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and reporting to a Board of Directors that includes representatives from the DoS, Treasury, USAID, Trade, the CEO, and four individuals from the private sector appointed by the President with input from congressional leaders. Congress endowed the MCC with considerable authority to provide assistance “notwithstanding any other provision of law” except the Millennium Challenge Act, “making the agency relatively independent of existing legislative mandates and other bureaucratic restrictions upon other aid agencies” (Brown, 2019). The MCC sees itself as making investments in carefully screened projects via multi-year but time-limited “business-like contracts” called compacts.

This proposal would not replace other agencies, subsume their responsibilities, or attempt to bring back the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) of old. Instead, it would build a center of excellence to practice the type of nimble, demand-responsive, and results-focused strategic communications that we need to encourage in the rapidly evolving landscape of the 21st century. The new agency would have the mandate to set clear and transparent business criteria for investing in projects that help countries build resilience to malign information influence, such as through strengthening the capacity of domestic media, supporting reforms to facilitate greater transparency of media ownership and mandatory disclosure of sponsored content, building media literacy within the general population, as well as the identification of and response to disinformation. Congress and the executive could maintain current levels of investment in the existing strategic communications infrastructure but channel new growth (new financial and human resources) into a new agency that is fit-for-purpose. In so doing, it takes a lesson from past successes in not “putting new money into old vehicles” (Brown, 2022).

Pros: This approach would allow leaders to create a new culture that focuses on results, is responsive to target audiences in partner countries, emphasizes competitive project selection, and allows for cost effective delivery and performance monitoring. As a center of excellence, the new agency could create a ‘race to the top’ dynamic in emboldening and incentivizing other agencies, such as the DoS and the USAGM, to place greater emphasis on results and innovation.

Cons: Creating a new agency takes time and resources to design and stand up before seeing results. Although there is an appeal to trying something new rather than trying to reform existing bureaucracies, this will not solve the interagency coordination challenges that plague strategic communications, even if it does succeed in addressing other challenges related to audience responsiveness, prioritization, and producing results. Moreover, there is a risk that this further perpetuates some of the underlying interagency dysfunction, as yet another actor is provided with new authorities without any changes to how the various entities work together to achieve common goals.

Option 3.1.5 Form a “DFC-like” agency to crowd-in private sector involvement in reaching new media markets, supporting information infrastructure, and brokering strategic partnerships.

Investing in new media and telecommunications markets, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, can often be a deterrent for U.S. businesses due to a variety of political and economic risks. Yet, Russia and the PRC make extensive use of state-owned or state-subsidized media outlets and enterprises to penetrate local markets with their broadcasting and telecommunications technologies, as well as via cooperation agreements and ownership shares in domestic companies/outlets. This unchecked dominance is not only bad for local societies that become more vulnerable to malign foreign influence but also disadvantages U.S. companies from entering these markets in future. Creating a new agency that reduces barriers for U.S. companies to find willing local or international partners to pursue new media operations or telecommunications investments, as well as reduces their exposure to the political and economic risks of new ventures, could be advantageous. This could leverage the dynamism of the private sector in ways that advance U.S. interests and reduce the risks of partner countries to malign foreign influence, while generating economic returns for U.S. companies and taxpayers.

The inspiration for this approach could be the U.S. Development Finance Corporation (DFC), adapted to fit the needs and context of strategic communications. The U.S. DFC was established in 2019 with the passage of the 2018 Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act. The intent was to strengthen U.S. development finance tools to advance U.S. economic interests and foreign policy aims by reducing barriers to entry for private sector investments in less developed countries, with an eye towards competing with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, BRI (CRS, 2022). The new agency replaced the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), which had a more limited mandate, and also subsumed the responsibilities of USAID’s Development Credit Authority. Congress endowed the new super agency with “expanded authorities, a higher lending cap, and a longer authorization of seven years” (ibid). The U.S. DFC leverages a variety of tools, including: debt financing, equity investments, investment funds, feasibility studies, political risk insurance, and technical assistance. It has a similar governance structure to the MCC, in that it is run by a Chief Executive Officer, who reports to a nine-member board with representation from the DoS, Treasury,

Commerce, and USAID, along with four non-governmental members. Board members are presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed.

This proposal would involve creating and endowing a new agency, with a focus on a narrower set of sectors than the DFC, but a broader set of functions. The agency would seek to reduce barriers and crowd-in U.S. businesses into the media and telecommunications markets of other countries in several ways: financing (both debt instruments and equity investments), insurance (political and economic risk), brokering (helping find and match U.S. companies with willing partners in the local market for joint ventures), and advisory support. These offerings would be designed in such a way as to be complementary but not duplicative to the DFC. Although the DFC does support projects in the telecommunications sector (e.g., Internet and mobile service providers, telecommunications towers, and data centers), this is a small sub-emphasis in a fairly broad set of offerings. Moreover, the DFC has no obvious emphasis on supporting the expansion of U.S. companies into new media markets. Comparatively, a new agency with a more focused mandate could exclusively focus in these areas of telecommunications and media markets, particularly in areas that are deemed to be the most at risk for co-optation and malign foreign influence in the information space. This would allow the DFC to refocus its efforts in other valuable areas of development finance.

Pros: This approach could reduce the barriers to participation for private sector companies and crowd in their dynamism in innovating new platforms, services, and content that speaks to consumers in other countries and is produced much more easily and cost effectively than the public sector could do on its own. It would inject more competition in local markets for media and telecommunications, making it more difficult for them to be co-opted by authoritarian competitors such as Russia and the PRC. Foreign publics may not become more pro-U.S., but increasing the plurality of media they consume can serve an important inoculation function in reducing vulnerability to manipulation and exploitation. It also capitalizes on the fact that private sector companies may be viewed as less likely to be co-opted by state interests, such that they are seen as more credible and independent actors.

Cons: Creating a new agency takes time and resources to design and stand up before seeing results. It would be important to clearly demarcate and deconflict the mandates and authorities of the new agency versus the current U.S. Development Finance

Corporation, so as not to create duplication of efforts or stoke new coordination challenges. The extent to which U.S. businesses can get involved in local media markets in other countries or supply critical information infrastructure is affected by the regulations of sovereign nations, which may create restrictions on where and how they can engage. This approach could work well in societies that are relatively open to external investment and allow for foreign companies or multinational corporations to be involved in the media and telecommunications sectors, but it may be hampered in contexts where the government retains tight control of these areas. It is also important to recognize that while this strategy does increase the number of voices and actors in local markets, the U.S. government will not be able to (nor should it) dictate the views expressed.

3.2 Operational Changes to Increase Coherence, Alignment, and/or Results

Option 3.2.1 Institute an interagency coordination committee in the NSC for strategic communications to develop joint strategies, share best practices, and fund joint activities.

Given the multitude of actors involved in strategic communications, it is critical to create venues and incentives for meaningful coordination to minimize duplication, increase synergies, and share insights. This proposal would form an interagency coordination committee for strategic communications within the National Security Council with representatives from the DoS, Defense, USAID, and the Intelligence Community. To be effective, the committee would need to have a mandate and resources from the President to promote interagency coordination both at a strategic level (through articulating joint strategies and plans) but also at the operational level through creating the conditions to effectively share information on relevant activities and assets, as well as fund innovative new projects that would provide small-scale strategic communications wins and help foster a culture of collaboration.

The inspiration for this proposal is drawn from several sources. The U.S. Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy has advised for several years that the White House should establish an “NSC Information Statecraft Policy Coordination Committee (PCC)” with representatives from DoS, Defense, and the Intelligence Community to share best

practices on information management and outreach strategies (ACPD, 2021, 2022). President George W. Bush instituted a Policy Coordination Committee for Strategic Communication under the direction of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (GAO, 2006). A departure point for the innovation fund could be the Department of Defense's Minerva DECUR partnership which issues grants to spur collaborative research between Defense Professional Military Education institutions and civilian research universities on priority topics of interest to DOD. Although the context was different, Minerva DECUR was designed to increase the benefits, to reduce the perceived transaction costs, of cooperation across traditional silos by tying resources to the desired behaviors, shrinking the change to discrete projects, and providing a process for identifying the best applicants and ensuring accountability for results.

Pros: The formation of an interagency committee within the NSC could send a strong signal about the importance of strategic communications to U.S. national security in ways that could crowd-in the participation of agency representatives if they believe the President is taking this seriously. Endowing this committee with resources to translate the rhetoric of coordination into the practice of joint projects could be helpful in creating a culture of collaboration and innovation. This committee could also conceivably be the group charged with developing, executing, and monitoring the strategic communications roadmap idea in 3.2.1 if both were pursued in tandem.

Cons: Mandating the formation of an interagency committee under the auspices of the NSC does ensure that there is theoretically a venue for coordination to happen, but past efforts indicate that this does not always mean that these venues are well-utilized. If the committee is formed but lacks sufficient authorities, mandate, or resources to incentivize behavior change across agencies it will revert to a talk shop at best or be moribund at worst. The use of an innovation fund could siphon away resources into pet projects of limited long-term staying power if there is no good way to document lessons learned and identify ways to scale these approaches beyond the scope of a time-bound, small-scale pilot.

Option 3.2.2 Require the President to produce a strategic communications roadmap to achieve the U.S. NSS and annually report on progress through the appropriations process.

The absence of a coherent strategy for U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy has routinely been identified as a pain point. This proposal would involve incorporating legislative language into the annual appropriations process that requires the President to work with all relevant agencies to develop a coherent U.S. strategic communications roadmap that articulates how broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts should be resourced, targeted, organized, coordinated, and measured to advance the National Security Strategy. Congress could also mandate a time period within which the strategy must be produced and the frequency of reporting on progress to Congress tied to future appropriations.

There is precedent for Congress to require the executive branch to produce and report on a strategy to address a national security issue. For example, the Secretary of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors during the administration of George W. Bush were mandated by the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act to develop a strategy with long-term objectives to counter anti-U.S. propaganda (Custer et al., 2022a). Similarly, President Barack Obama was required by Congress to produce a new national strategy for strategic communications and public diplomacy within the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2009 (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). The idea for a roadmap is derived from the Department of Defense's production of a Strategic Communications Execution Roadmap to operationalize the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review and focused on articulating specific tasks, plans, and milestones for completion as opposed to vague aspirations (ibid).

Pros: Aligning the production of and reporting on a strategic communications strategy as part of the congressional appropriations process increases the urgency and presidential attention on ensuring this gets done. Making this a roadmap rather than a vague strategy increases the likelihood that this becomes an action-oriented document that helps direct resources and monitor results. The process of getting to a strategy can also be an important means of building consensus and cooperation around shared activities as opposed to vague notions of coordination.

Cons: Asking for a strategy does not mean that what is produced will be useful and be used by the White House or government agencies to direct resources and action. If Congress ignores the requests of agencies to reorient resources from status quo activities or geographies in line with the roadmap, it will serve little practical purpose.

Option 3.2.3 Appropriate funds for broadcasting and public diplomacy to achieve broad outcomes rather than dictating specific inputs, but earmark 3 percent to support data-driven decisions and reporting of progress.

Past U.S. history has shown that the congressional appropriations process is a uniquely powerful way to tie resources to priorities, for better or worse. This proposal would have Congress use the power of its purse to tie appropriations for broadcasting and public diplomacy to broader outcomes that advance U.S. national interests (such as that outlined in a coherent strategic communications roadmap from option 3.2.1) rather than dictating how they should be achieved (e.g., radio versus digital). However, with that increased flexibility comes the need to have better ways to support data-driven decision-making within agencies to ensure they are putting resources to optimal use in ways that are most salient with their target audiences and effective in delivering desired results in line with stated objectives. For this reason, it will be important for Congress to pair broad appropriations for broadcasting and public diplomacy with the explicit requirement that 3 percent of these funds go to research, monitoring, and evaluation to better align programming with target audiences, make course corrections as needed, as well as report on progress to the White House, Congress, and the public.

The inspiration for this proposal is drawn from a few different places. First, there is precedent for Congress to issue broad appropriations, such as asking the BBG/USAGM to make and supervise grants for broadcasting to the Middle East, rather than specifying how this should be operationalized (Custer et al., 2022a). Second, a consistent recommendation of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy has been to increase prioritization of and funding for program research, targeting, and impact evaluations, referencing three percent being in line with industry and government best practices. Third, Congress has placed an emphasis on data-driven decisions in the past such as via the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 mandating agency-level learning agendas, evaluation plans, and capacity assessments (USAID, 2022).

Pros: Flexible funding that ties resourcing to well-defined outcomes creates accountability for agencies to produce results, while preserving their ability to craft strategies that are responsive to demand of their target audiences rather than the arms-length assessment of Congressional representatives. Earmarking a subset of funding for monitoring, evaluation, and research and requiring regular reporting on performance against outcomes to Congress creates a mutually reinforcing cycle to incentivize the collection and use of relevant data points throughout the programming and planning cycle.

Cons: If research and evaluation activities are viewed as pro forma reporting exercises, but not incorporated within agency planning and programming processes, there is a risk that these become superfluous to how decisions are actually made in practice. In an environment of constrained resources, even three percent can feel burdensome for agencies that may have to cut valuable programming in other areas to accommodate. Meanwhile, there is a risk that broad appropriations to achieve outcomes in the absence of a coherent strategic communications roadmap (as in 3.2.1) could result in results that are wildly different from expectations because there is lack of real agreement on what success looks like.

Option 3.2.4 Require DoS and USAGM to report on progress in implementing reforms to modernize broadcasting and public diplomacy for the 21st century via the appropriations process.

Recruiting, training, and retaining top-tier talent to staff critical broadcasting and public diplomacy roles has proven to be difficult given the existence of legacy structures and the tendency to deprioritize professional development and career advancement for these tracks relative to other specialties. There is also a need to upgrade these roles to navigate the unprecedented threats and opportunities posed by a digital world and more assertive competitors. Finally, to improve the salience and effectiveness of U.S. strategic communications it is critical to ensure that content and programming are more timely and responsive to the needs of key target audiences.

This proposal would have Congress incorporate these considerations into future appropriations for DoS and USAGM. For example, this could include explicit requirements as part of the appropriations process for agencies to report on how they have already and will in future: (i) decentralize more capacity, resources, and mandate

for the design and delivery of strategic communications from headquarters to the missions/grantees; (ii) align targeting of resources to demonstrated local demand and U.S. goals; and (iii) update roles and career tracks for field and headquarters staff working on broadcasting and public diplomacy to better recruit, train, reward, and retain top talent.

Pros: Tying demonstrated progress to future appropriations could get the incentives right for agencies to prioritize reforms in ways that will make U.S. strategic communications more responsive to audiences, aligned with broader goals, and better positioned to navigate a world where competitors are making extensive use of digital communications tools.

Cons: Reporting to Congress on these matters does not necessarily mean that they will be prioritized and operationalized effectively in executive branch agencies. If some of the structural changes are pursued in section 3.1, the merits of this option would need to be revisited and/or the content adapted.

Option 3.2.5 Fund the formation of a non-partisan, non-governmental organization to promote mutual understanding, people-to-people ties, and shared democratic norms between Americans and counterparts.

Traditionally it has been a major pain point to engage the U.S. public—universities, private companies, civil society actors, individual citizens—to be part of the solution in ensuring that U.S. strategic communications is effectively advancing America’s reputational security. This proposal would have Congress fund the formation of a non-partisan, non-governmental organization with the mandate to promote stronger ties between average Americans and foreign publics around the world. Rather than relying on government agencies to provide state-directed opportunities for fellowships, exchanges, and other forms of public diplomacy, the new organization would build bridges between American businesspeople, media professionals, students, faculty, and civil society advocates with their peers in other countries to build relations and common purpose around shared democratic values and norms. This could be achieved via a combination of programming—short and medium-term exchange programs, mentoring programs, foreign language learning, clubs for youth, communities of practice for professionals, training, and events.

There is precedent for this type of proposal through Congress' creation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation to support a variety of organizations and programming around the world that advances the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions. NED receives annual appropriations from Congress to fund its grant-making. There are four private, non-governmental organizations—National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center—that regularly receive grants from NED to operate programs around the world. The four organizations operate independently from the U.S. government and in addition to core support from the NED, they have successfully crowded in financial and in-kind support from other sources as well.

One option to execute this proposal would be for Congress to work with and through the NED to set up a new private, non-governmental organization (in the vein of an NDI, IRI, etc) but specifically for this purpose of fostering people-to-people ties and dialogue around shared democratic norms. Since any programming would be carried out entirely through a non-governmental actor, rather than the US government, and there is not a government communications component to it, this could be done even without any changes to the Smith-Mundt Act which places restrictions on how government agencies carrying out public diplomacy with foreign publics talk with domestic actors about these activities.

Pros: The American public has gravitated to opportunities to engage with foreign counterparts in the past (e.g., study abroad programs, overseas fellowships, language learning, Peace Corps), but given the reliance on meager government resources to foster this programming, there may be greater demand than supply. This approach would crowd-in awareness and participation from a broader set of American actors—universities, companies, civil society organizations, individuals—to help promote shared norms and dialogue with foreign counterparts in ways that will advance U.S. reputational security. It would effectively build a broader domestic constituency interested in seeing America continue to engage in the world, as well as appreciation for exchange and public diplomacy in facilitating mutual understanding. Moreover, the participation of actors outside of government may be seen as having greater credibility with foreign publics that may view state-directed initiatives with skepticism or outright distrust.

Cons: Similar to the drawbacks of many of the structural options in 3.1, spinning up a new organization will take time and resources before seeing results. It would be important to clearly demarcate how the mandate and focus of this organization would be different and complementary to the other NED grantees, so as not to create duplication of efforts or stoke new coordination challenges. It is possible that the American public will not be interested in participating, given rising populism and insularity. Moreover, given limited resources for international affairs more broadly, this option could displace other worthwhile broadcasting and public diplomacy activities led by government agencies directly.

Option 3.2.6 Establish a Partnership for Global Education and Cultural Understanding with G7 allies as a people-focused sister initiative to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.

In areas of common interest, America should look to burden-share with like-minded partners to pool resources and capacity to deliver surrogate broadcasting in information-constrained countries and jointly fund exchange programs for priority target audiences. This proposal would focus on collaborating with like-minded G7 allies to mobilize resources to facilitate education and cultural exchange, as well as cooperation in the media cooperation and broadcasting spheres to support dialogue and mutual understanding between countries with the intent to support the development of free, open, and inclusive societies. The partnership would operate as something akin to a multi-donor trust fund that crowds-in funding and technical assistance from bilateral agencies across the G7 countries as well as seeking contributions from private and civil society sector partners. Programming could involve jointly funded educational and cultural exchange programs, as well as vocational and professional training with an emphasis on those working in the media, education, and justice sectors, as well as joint international broadcasting and media cooperation activities.

The precedent for this primarily draws upon President Biden’s announcement of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment in which G7 partners aim to “mobilize US\$600 billion by 2027” to “deliver quality, sustainable infrastructure that makes a difference in people’s lives around the world, strengthens, and diversifies our supply chains, creates new opportunities for American workers and businesses, and advances our national security” (White House, 2022). There are also opportunities to

learn from other multi-donor trust funds such as those operated by the World Bank as well as health-focused vertical funds such as the Global Fund and GAVI.

Pros: In forming the original Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment as a response to the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative, the G7 missed a major component of Xi Jinping's vision of promoting multiple "connectivities," including a major emphasis on people-to-people ties in the education, culture, and information domains. Establishing the Partnership for Global Education and Cultural Understanding with G7 partners rounds out what the U.S. and its allies are able to offer as a value proposition to the rest of the world. It leverages U.S. expertise and leadership in the realm of media and exchange, while crowding-in additional resources beyond what we could bring to bear alone.

Cons: Given that the G7 has just swallowed one major multi-donor partnership, it is possible that there may be insufficient political will, resources, or bandwidth to tackle yet another. The U.S. has a history of proclaiming grand multi-country partnerships (e.g., Indo-Pacific Strategy, Blue Dot Network) but failing to follow-through with financing and political support to make this more than an unfunded mandate. The same risk would be in play for both of the proposed G7 partnerships (on infrastructure and education/culture). It is also worth noting that in any multi-stakeholder partnership there are higher transaction costs in building consensus on what the purpose should be, how that mandate should be operationalized in practice, and the ways in which decisions will be made and success evaluated.

Option 3.2.7 Revisit and revise legislation that hampers mobilizing the participation of the American public in being part of the solution to safeguard U.S. reputational security.

U.S. congressional legislation bans the use of public diplomacy funds domestically or the distribution or dissemination of related materials within the United States. This proposal would have Congress review relevant language in the Smith-Mundt Act and its later amendments, the 1994 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, along with other legislation and determine what adjustments need to be made to allow for adequate protections of the American public, while increasing the freedom of DoS and USAGM to be effective communicators to and partners with non-government actors that can support their work. Specifically, Congress could consider including provisions

that require disclosure of the source of funding for any materials that are shared with domestic audiences, ensuring that any materials available to domestic publics are truthful and contain no instances of deception, as well as non-partisan in not promoting the parochial interests of any party.

Pros: Reviewing and revising the legislative restrictions for DoS and USAGM to engage with the American public could be a boon to strengthening U.S. strategic communications through crowding-in interest from non-governmental actors who can provide support, and mobilize them to be watchdogs that hold government accountable for effective use of strategic communications funds.

Cons: There is always a possibility that in loosening restrictions, the American public could become exposed to government propaganda, though the risk of this would be mitigated if protections remained regarding disclosure of funding or source of the content, as well as blanket restrictions on the sharing of content that contains deception. Regardless of the potential impact on the American public, this is perhaps the most politically fraught of all the options in this paper due to intensely held views within Congress itself. Even considering this option could invite substantial scrutiny and political pushback.

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Appendix

PEPFAR's Lessons for Reimagining and Revitalizing U.S. Strategic Communications

Eric Brown | Gates Global Policy Center

The 2003 launch of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) by President George W. Bush and a bipartisan group of lawmakers marked a dramatic escalation in the U.S.'s fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic—particularly in the hardest-hit countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Today, as its twenty-year anniversary nears, PEPFAR is widely praised for delivering life-extending treatment to over 21 million, preventing infections in millions more, stabilizing entire societies once devastated by disease, and catalyzing global action among diverse nations which has decisively altered the trajectory of the HIV/AIDS plague for the better.

PEPFAR is also a model of successful American statecraft—of how the U.S.'s resources and talents can be efficiently and effectively marshaled by American leadership to achieve history-making influence on a global scale. The program, as such, provides a blueprint for reimagining and revitalizing other key non-military instruments of national power, including Strategic Communications, which the U.S. will need if it is to cope well with the unraveling of the post-1991 geopolitical settlement and what the 2022 National Security Strategy describes as the deepening “contest for the future of our world.”

PEPFAR's key architects in the Bush 43 White House¹ have identified a range of critical ingredients and design features which help explain why the President's Plan worked:

First, top-level political vision and ownership of the policy was vital.

PEPFAR was the result of a conscious effort led by President Bush to dramatically enlarge the scope and scale of the U.S.'s fight against HIV/AIDS, the ghastliest plague to befall mankind since the Black Death.

Even before they assumed office, President Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were determined to make Africa, a continent of immense promise and strategic importance, a core focus of American policy. They also resolved to do more to combat AIDS. That sense of urgency was reinforced by reporting in the early 2000s on the sheer horror of the emergency in sub-Saharan Africa. AIDS had already destroyed over twenty million lives, and another 36 million were HIV infected.

¹ The author would like to gratefully acknowledge Amb. Dr. Mark Dybul, Mr. Gary Edson, Dr. Jendayi Frazer, Mr. Stephen Hadley, and Dr. Mark Lagon for their invaluable time and insights. Errors are the author's own.

Botswana's President Festus Mogae spoke for other African leaders when he said his country was at risk of "extinction."

Fast and decisive action was critical if the world stood any chance at arresting the pandemic, and Bush "aggressively shaped" the U.S.'s response from the start of his presidency.

Second, PEPFAR was a direct outgrowth of a larger paradigm shift in how the U.S. conducted overseas development and humanitarian operations.

In addition to renewing the moral imperative of foreign aid, the 2002 National Security Strategy put overseas development front and center on the American security agenda, and then linked this further with the U.S.'s pursuit of economic interest and responsible governance on the international stage.

President Bush was deeply critical of the U.S.'s conventional approach to overseas development. American aid was inefficiently distributed via multiple competing agencies and "development industry" pass-throughs and then poured into projects which had a "lousy track record" of benefiting the very people they were meant to help. These "handouts" failed taxpayers at home and abetted corruption abroad. In his 2002 Inter-American Development Bank speech, Bush called for a "new model"—a new compact which tied "greater contributions from developed nations" directly with "greater responsibility" and results from developing ones.

Third, in making the case for responsible and strategic altruism, the President was determined not to "put new money in old vehicles."

The 2002 Mother-Child HIV Prevention Initiative, a key precursor to PEPFAR, showed promising results and effectively doubled the U.S. war chest in the anti-AIDS struggle. But the President recognized this was not enough. As Bush said in his 2002 Rose Garden speech announcing the new initiative: "As we see what works, we will make more funding available."

Discovering "what works" required experimentation and breaking with established pieties and programs. After his Rose Garden announcement, Bush challenged his deputy Joshua Bolten to "go back to the drawing board and think even bigger." Bolten found a model not in Washington, but in Uganda's pioneering efforts to combine large-scale antiretroviral distribution with a civil society-led push to modify behavior and deliver enhanced services to the communities racked by disease. In the fight against HIV/AIDS, this was compelling proof something more than triage was possible.

Four, it was necessary to "break [or circumvent] rules" in Washington.

PEPFAR was emphatically not the product of an “interagency process,” but the innovation of an objectives-driven “SWAT Team” empowered by the President and answerable to him. The President prioritized allowing “good people to do good work” and gave them license to think and act big, including by “pretending money is no object.”

The White House “skunkworks” team was skeptical a worldwide strategy for AIDS could be engineered from inside a large bureaucracy. The process they tend to engender “seeks out the lowest common denominator” and “prevents extreme results.” Moreover, desperately needed resources and expertise were siloed across government under different authorities with different agendas, and, early on, some agencies “hated” the PEPFAR concept simply “because it wasn’t theirs.”

The emergency in Africa could not wait for a complicated governmental restructuring. Initially, then, the White House’s development of PEPFAR relied on a prudent dose of secrecy. The intent was to circumvent the narrow-minded agendas and unpredictable politics which might derail the presidential initiative. At the same time, the White House was firm in its belief the overwhelming majority of those in government did not enlist because they relished inter-agency turf battles. The many who serve “want to be a part of larger things,” and harnessing this sense of obligation and mission among Americans was indispensable to PEPFAR’s success.

Six, from the outset, PEPFAR’s engineers focused on gaining the requisite political support for their initiatives.

The White House political strategy prioritized building a Big Tent through targeted outreach to congressional leaders from both parties, as well as select leaders in civil society, the faith community, and business. This outreach was not about creating an echo chamber for official talking points, but really about education: it focused on dispelling myths about a poorly understood plague in far-away places, and on showing effective treatment and care was possible. Ideological and political differences were allayed by the pragmatic respect for the American creed: that each human life has worth, and that securing them was good policy.

The President’s 2003 State of the Union address called on Congress to commit \$15 billion over five years. “Seldom has history offered a greater opportunity to do so much for so many,” Bush said to lawmakers. The magnitude of the President’s Plan was startling and inspiring—even to Bush’s fiercest critics, who had never hoped for so much, as one White House official recollected. “Boldness became its own reward” and galvanized support for the policy. The “coalitions of strange bedfellows”—citizens, politicians of all persuasions, preachers, celebrities—were crucial for getting PEPFAR off the ground and for its three bipartisan reauthorizations since then.

Seven, the President’s Plan depended on accountability at all levels.

From the outset, Bush was clear about PEPFAR's strategic objectives and put "hard targets in the ground"—i.e., life-extending drugs delivered, infections prevented, orphans and broken communities cared for. Setting clear and measurable goals—and hitting them—were essential for gaining congressional support and keeping it.

Early on, in 2002, the National Intelligence Council released its "Next Wave" report estimating the spread of HIV in the most populous countries of Africa and Asia would drive the number of infected upwards of 75 million by 2010.²² This led to surging support at home and abroad for the creation of a hulking supra-national organization to coordinate a truly global response. When the White House resisted this, it caught flack for unilateralism. But President Bush insisted his administration was only being pragmatic: for effective national action, the president "needed to hold people accountable."

By concentrating U.S. resources and energy on twelve of the hardest-hit and poorest countries in Africa and two in the Caribbean, the President believed U.S. leadership could "blaze a trail" which other nations would follow. Bush ultimately succeeded in persuading wealthy allies and others to ramp-up their commitments in the fight against HIV/AIDS and other threats to public health.

Eight, in standing up a U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, institutional design mattered.

In early days, PEPFAR's architects made a close study of the command structures of CENTCOM and joint anti-terrorism task forces. COMCENT's far-reaching powers to coordinate among the services and other agencies to wage a many-faceted strategic campaign across a large and diverse geographic area was judged a fitting model for the AIDS Coordinator.

The Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy was thereby conceived as a "seventh floor entity" with direct report to the Secretary of State, the imprimatur of the President, and, crucially, vested with its own resources. Empowering a single agency with such authorities and its own resources protected the PEPFAR policy from intra-bureaucratic squabbling and foot-dragging. It also gave the Coordinator the institutional heft in D.C. to take the fight against a dynamic viral foe to the global stage.

In effect, the AIDS Coordinator was given a command authority which very few civilians in government possess. Through this, and with steady bipartisan backing and ownership in Congress, the President's resolve to tackle AIDS evolved into an efficient, effective, results-driven, twenty-year campaign to roll it back. Today, the current PEPFAR

² See National Intelligence Council, *The Next Wave of HIV/AIDS: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia, India, and China*, September 2002. Available at: <https://irp.fas.org/nic/hiv-aids.html>

Coordinator, Ambassador Dr. Nkengasong, is leading a bold strategic effort aimed at “fulfilling America’s promise” to end the AIDS pandemic by 2030.

Nine, it mattered not only *what* the Coordinator did but *how*.

In Africa (and beyond), the administration’s guiding rule was “partnership as opposed to the paternalism of the past,” as NSC Africa director Jendayi Frazer once put it. By design, the State Department’s Chiefs of Mission in Africa were given responsibility to work closely with their Africa counterparts to devise country-specific implementation plans. This focused American aid and attention on the things which mattered—and away from any infighting in D.C.

The key to success involved forging long-lasting compacts and partnerships with dynamic, results-driven frontline leaders in Africa—and then backing them to the hilt. This required systematic analysis of the many *opportunities* to shape the dire situation for the better—and then ensuring our African partners had the resources and expertise (incl. knowledge acquired from other successful engagements) to effectively implement their strategies. As Ambassador Dr. Mark Dybul, the 2nd AIDS Coordinator, recently reflected, PEPFAR is infused with a “belief in people”—the idea that “otherwise ordinary people” can achieve “extraordinary things.”

In addition to reminding how American statecraft can change history for the better, PEPFAR stands out as a model for thinking about ways to reimagine and revitalize U.S. Strategic Communications. In the many-front geopolitical struggle the U.S. and its allies now face, a paradigm-shift and overhaul of how the U.S. conducts complex political and influence operations overseas is required. But one theory of success may not involve a time-consuming and perhaps unworkable restructuring of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)—or the 1994 international broadcasting law and the associated “firewall” provisions which govern the USAGM. Significantly, under the current 1994 law as amended, the USAGM must retain the “capability to provide a surge capacity to support...foreign policy objectives during crises abroad.” The law also gives the President the emergency authority to call on this capacity:

SEC. 316. (22 U.S.C. 6216) SPECIAL AUTHORITY FOR SURGE CAPACITY.

(a) EMERGENCY AUTHORITY.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Whenever the President determines it to be important to the national interests of the United States and so certifies to the appropriate congressional committees, the President, on such terms and conditions as the President may determine, is *authorized to direct any department, agency, or other entity of the United States* [ital. added] to furnish the United States Agency for Global Media with such assistance outside the United States as may be necessary to provide international

broadcasting activities of the United States with a surge capacity to support United States foreign policy objectives during a crisis abroad.

(2) SUPERSEDES EXISTING LAW.—The authority of paragraph (1) shall supersede any other provision of law.

(3) SURGE CAPACITY DEFINED.—In this subsection, the term “surge capacity” means the financial and technical resources necessary to carry out broadcasting activities in a geographical area during a crisis abroad.

The bill for this Special Authority was first put forward in 2004 by Senator Joe Biden.³

Given all this, a PEPFAR-style plan for revamping Strategic Communications could begin with the empowerment of a U.S. Global Coordinator. The Coordinator must have the command authority and resources to design and wage a many-faceted strategic campaign aimed at shaping the unfolding political “contest for the future of our world.” Among other things, the Coordinator could drive the innovation and large-scale distribution of Open Technology to break down the increasingly impervious barriers to free communication and exchange among peoples which are now being erected across Eurasia and beyond. The Coordinator could then also rely on officers from State and other agencies overseas to systematically collect, study, and understand the current and emerging opportunities to both help America’s allies and friends and to complicate and/or raise costs on our competitors. Finally, the Coordinator could undertake to forge close partnerships with dynamic frontline leaders and substate movements around the globe and ensure they have the strategic advice, tools, and resources they need to expose the truth about the violence and repression, kleptocracy, the activities and long-term ambitions, and the very real political vulnerabilities of the U.S.’s rivals and foes.

³ See S.2874 Initiative 911 Act, as introduced by Senator Joe Biden, on September 30, 2004, accessible at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/2874/text?r=288&s=6>