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Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications Review: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight

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How the U.S. government communicates with the world—explaining policies, presenting facts about American life and values, promoting the national interest by helping foreign audiences understand America—is a matter of no small importance. During the Cold War, for example, engagement in the war of ideas through the United States Information Agency was a critical element of the West’s victory over the Soviet Union. Today, new informational and ideological challenges to American leadership have arisen: radical Islamism, Chinese expansionism, Russian revanchism, Venezuelan disinformation, etc. Furthermore, the media environment has become far more competitive and diverse than was the case during the Cold War. If there was ever a time that called out for a new and sophisticated U.S. public diplomacy doctrine, this is it.

The good news is that a much-needed strategic overview of the government’s public diplomacy and strategic communication assets and functions is underway. Unfortunately, it has taken over a year for an Administration that came into office dedicated to “changing America’s image in the world” to address U.S. public diplomacy. Although the Obama Administration has finally produced several long-awaited documents on public diplomacy and strategic communication, these documents do little to reveal what the Administration is planning to actually do. In all, this conceptual exercise cries out for Congress to hold hearings in order to flesh out the details of the Administration’s plans. The new Caucus for Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy, launched by Representatives Mack

Thornberry (R–TX) and Adam Smith (D–WA) on March 4, is well positioned to explore these questions and raise awareness of the public diplomacy issue on the Hill.

National Strategy for Strategic Communication. On Tuesday, the National Security Council promulgated its own “National Strategy for Strategic Communication,” as mandated by the fiscal year (FY) 2009 defense authorization bill. The document follows the Department of Defense’s “Report on Strategic Communication,” also mandated by the FY 2009 defense authorization bill, published in February. On March 10, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, presenting the State Department’s roadmap to “U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World.” (Additionally, the State Department is working on its “Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review,” now scheduled for mid-summer publication.)

These three recently published documents seem to agree that major institutional changes within the U.S. government are not to be expected. All three also discuss greater coordination through the National Security Council (NSC) and through the

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interagency process—a holistic approach that could be difficult for an organization as large as the U.S. government. There is also the danger that if everybody is focused on public diplomacy or strategic communication, then nobody is focused on it.

The most specific document of the three is the State Department's "roadmap." McHale in fact did a comprehensive job of identifying the global challenges. The roadmap is, according to McHale, to be fleshed out by strategy teams. Among the challenges she identified are:

- "Extremists" with "sophisticated media strategies," who are increasingly adept at shaping the narrative and recruiting new followers (note the absence of the word *Islamist*);
- China's global influence with broad outreach programs and language teaching;
- Aggressive marketing of higher education opportunities in the EU, Singapore, and Australia;
- Russia's media presence in the former USSR; and
- Iran's cultural centers and political linkages influencing key audiences.

Modest Changes Are Insufficient. In order to deal with these challenges, McHale offered modest structural changes within State, including six new Deputy Assistant Secretaries for Public Diplomacy in the State Department's regional bureaus. It is hard to see how such a modest change could have an impact on the impressive set of global challenges.

Another change identified by McHale would be the establishment of a new Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Media Support to report to Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs P. J. Crowley. Given the lack of access endured by the foreign media in Washington, which affects the coverage of U.S. foreign policy abroad, this is not a bad idea. And lastly, she also proposed recruiting a staff within the International Information Programs (IIP) to conduct audience research among foreign publics. Such research is in fact desperately needed, but there are no plans for adding the necessary resources to the IIP.

And the fact is that the State Department's record as the lead agency on public diplomacy hardly inspires great confidence. Foggy Bottom harbors an

institutional bias against soft power and does not have the authority to command other U.S. government agencies to coordinate public diplomacy efforts. The Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy does not have the necessary budgetary and line authority. And at the NSC, where the interagency coordination ultimately takes place, there is insufficient staffing for such an initiative.

It might also be added that President Obama's tendency to begin his speeches to foreign audiences with an apology for American history hardly contributes to a positive national "narrative." Despite the economic downturn and the challenges to American international leadership, the United States remains a unique, global leader and a critically important source of stability capable of spreading liberal, democratic, and free-market values. This is the narrative the U.S. government should be reinforcing.

A Long-Overdue Debate. In light of the Obama Administration's stated intentions to focus on public diplomacy—and indeed in light of the President's personal interest in the subject—there is room for a long-overdue debate on public diplomacy. As for Congress, the relevant congressional oversight committees should:

- Hold hearings as strategy documents are produced by the executive branch to illuminate the shortcomings of existing public diplomacy structures within the U.S. government;
- Hold hearings on each of the multiple public diplomacy and strategic communications challenges faced by the United States today and the specific actions that the U.S. government can take to address them; and
- Fund pilot projects that can illustrate the effectiveness of foreign audience research in formulating targeted messaging to build the case for more extensive, strategic audience research.

Such oversight will provide America with a foundation for the revitalized and multifaceted public diplomacy doctrine demanded by the challenges of the 21st century.

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