

Background Research
Gates Forum I

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

Samantha Custer (with Inputs from the Gates Forum
Background Paper Authors)
AidData | Global Research Institute | William & Mary

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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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