

Background Research
Gates Forum I

(Re)investing in Our Reputational
Security: Alternative Models and
Options Strengthen U.S. Strategic
Communications

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Why Is Now the Time to Invest in Reputational Security?	1
2. Current Reality Versus Desired Future: What Are the Pain Points?	2
2.1 A Lack of Political and Technical Leadership	2
2.2 Insufficient Resources With Poor Prioritization	3
2.3 Toothless Coordination Across Diffuse Operations	4
2.4 A Broken Feedback Loop between Supply and Demand	5
2.5 Going It Alone, Versus Crowding in Support From Allies and Partners	5
2.6 Navigating a Time of Unprecedented Threats and Opportunities	6
3. Reform Options: How Can We Do Better?	8
3.1 Structural Changes to Improve Leadership, Coordination and/or Capacity	8
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.	8
Option 3.1.2 Create an “PEPFAR-like” Office of the Global Coordinator of U.S. Reputational Security at the State Department.	10
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.	12
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.	15
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.	17
3.2 Operational Changes to Increase Coherence, Alignment, and/or Results	19
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.	19

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.	21
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.	22
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.	23
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.	24
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.	26
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.	28
References		29
Appendix		31
	PEPFAR's Lessons for Reimagining and Revitalizing U.S. Strategic Communications	31

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.

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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.^{2[2]} 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>