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**America's Extended Hand:**  
*Assessing the Obama Administration's  
Global Engagement Strategy*

By Kristin M. Lord and Marc Lynch



Center for a  
New American  
Security

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### Cover Image

In October 2007, then Senator Barack Obama addresses a crowd of more than 5,000 on Hayden Lawn, in front of West Hall, at a late morning campaign stop at Arizona State University.  
(TOM STORY)

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## *About the Authors*

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Engagement is a pillar and guiding principle of President Barack Obama's foreign policy. At the beginning of Obama's presidency, the United States faced a global public widely angry at America and distrustful of its motives. An unpopular war in Iraq and a controversial war on terror threatened America's moral authority overseas and divided even America's allies. Despite substantial reorientation during the Bush administration, this sentiment lingered, providing an all too convenient rallying point for America's enemies and intractable political obstacles to cooperation with the United States. Damaged credibility constrained American power.

Barack Obama pledged to renew America's relationship with the world, working in concert with other nations to address shared global challenges. He signaled a strong break from the past and delivered an ambitious series of speeches designed to build a strong foundation of support for his administration's foreign policy agenda. But while his efforts enjoyed early success — improving foreign public opinions of America and raising hopes globally — the administration struggled to deliver on its promises. It raised expectations that the administration could not fulfill in the short term and is scrambling to fulfill in the longer term.

This paper assesses the administration's global public engagement strategy and its implementation to date. Though the administration's commitment to engagement has encompassed a range of efforts such as negotiating with adversaries as well as allies, working through multilateral institutions, and a stronger commitment to diplomacy, we focus on just one key dimension of the president's broader engagement strategy, which we term strategic public engagement and define as efforts to engage, inform and persuade foreign publics to advance U.S. national interests. We do not address engagement through state-to-state diplomacy

and we touch only briefly upon the challenge of combating violent extremism, which is the subject of a separate paper by the Center for a New America Security (CNAS).

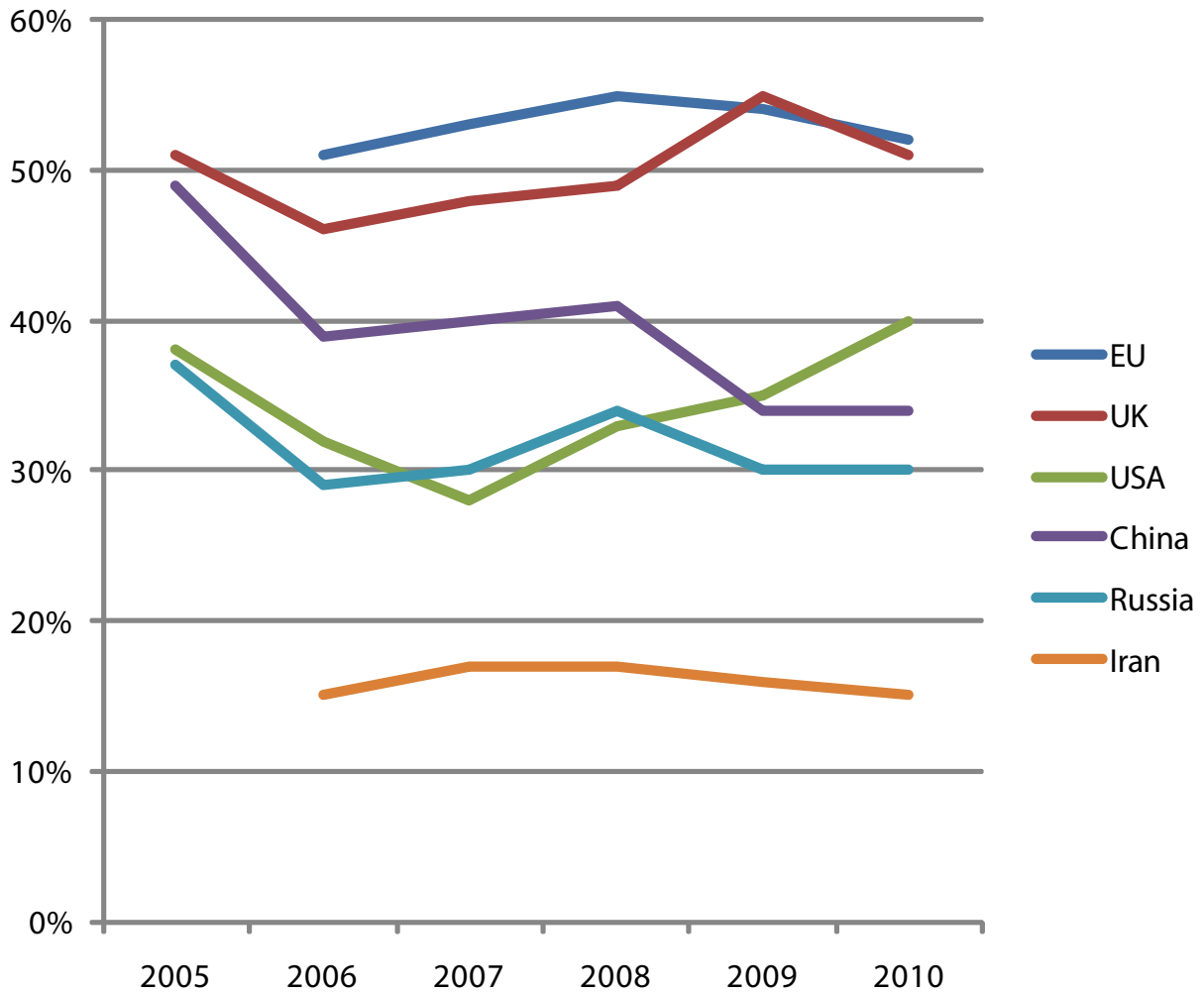
In conducting this assessment, the authors met together or individually with dozens of key government officials (to whom we promised anonymity to guarantee frank discussions) across the relevant agencies, reviewed a range of policy documents and initiatives, and analyzed the role of U.S. public engagement in key parts of the world. **Our goals are straightforward: to assess critically what has been done and what remains to be done in order to maximize the chances that the administration can succeed in advancing America's national security objectives through public engagement.**

We examine, first, the administration's overall philosophy regarding public engagement and show how it both differs from those of previous administrations and demonstrates striking continuity with the last years of the Bush administration. Second, we examine the administration's public engagement strategy in three key policy areas – relations between the United States and the Muslim world, combating violent extremism and promoting democracy and human rights – and in each of four countries – Iran, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Third, we discuss the Obama administration's efforts to build the institutional capacity necessary to execute a “whole of government” public engagement strategy as recommended by more than 30 earlier reports that criticized America's capacity to engage in successful, coordinated public diplomacy. In particular, we focus on the roles of the president himself, the National Security Council (NSC), Department of Defense (DOD), State Department, Broadcasting Board of Governors, and the administration's efforts to synchronize the activities of these organizations.

In assessing the success of public engagement, it is important to recognize both the limits and potential of this nebulous instrument of statecraft. Public engagement is no silver bullet. If policies are unpopular, no amount of snazzy marketing will make them beloved. If national interests are fundamentally at odds, no amount of dialogue will align them. Practitioners of public engagement can aspire only to explain the motivation behind unpopular policies (that U.S. attacks on al Qaeda are intended to counter terrorism, not to wage war on Islam, for instance), put them in context, and highlight the many areas where interests and values do overlap. Public engagement is also used most effectively in concert with other instruments of power, as a sort of diplomatic force-multiplier that can amplify the impact of agile diplomacy, effective development activities and successful military operations. Finally, public engagement provides policymakers with options when other instruments of statecraft are severely constrained.

We conclude that, in many ways, the Obama administration has achieved its initial objective of “re-starting” America's relationship with the world. The administration clearly understands the importance of dialogue and of listening to foreign publics, and it is attempting to incorporate a sensitivity to public opinion into its foreign policy decision making and translate public support into political leverage. It has aggressively reached out to foreign populations through mass media, embassies, and Internet-based social media. It has confronted directly issues of major political concern abroad, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, while also working to build partnerships that will advance lower-profile but urgent issues of shared concern, such as economic opportunity and education. President Obama's personal popularity is high. His widely admired speeches, like his Cairo address to the world's Muslim communities and his words

Figure 1: Positive Views of Key Countries According to 28 Nation Poll



Source: BBC World Service, "Global Views of United States Improve While Other Countries Decline" (18 April 2010).

upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, have riveted people around the globe. The administration has also made behind-the-scenes changes designed to strengthen interagency coordination and improve the organizations that support U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communication.

Though it is challenging to discern clear instances in which public engagement alone made an impact, the past 18 months suggest some tangible results: greater support from NATO allies

in Afghanistan, more support for the administration's policy on Iran, and an al Qaeda organization on the defensive. The willingness of 47 world leaders to convene in Washington for the April 2010 summit on nuclear security further demonstrated a new receptivity to U.S. leadership. Many factors contributed to all of these accomplishments, of course, but more favorable public views of the United States created a political climate more conducive to success.

Yet, at the same time, high expectations have given way to skepticism as the administration has struggled to deliver on its early promises. The administration has been less successful at implementing engagement strategies to support specific foreign policy objectives and slow to jump through the windows of opportunity it has opened. It has grappled to find the right balance between building trust, credibility, and long-term relationships on the one hand and developing more tactically focused engagement strategies to advance particular foreign policy objectives on the other. Efforts to deliver on the promises made and expectations raised by President Obama's speeches have been inadequately communicated (e.g., the follow-up to the president's Cairo overture to the Muslim world) or else have simply been unmet (e.g., promises to close Guantanamo). It is not yet clear if the administration's quieter means of promoting democracy and human rights will ultimately prove more successful than the Bush administration's more vocal approach.

Moreover, though reforms to the institutions of public engagement are underway in the federal government, the ability to implement public engagement strategies remains hampered by limited capacity and insufficient coordination. For all the talk of "smart power" and "whole of government" strategies, bureaucratic obstacles continue to block reform efforts. Major positions remain unfilled, or have been filled only recently after long vacancies, while key offices work with skeleton staffs and scanty budgets. Questions swirl among stakeholders about leadership, strategy, authorities, and coordination.

While we find some of the most vocal criticism of the administration's engagement strategies unpersuasive, we do identify a number of serious problems that the administration should take into account and adjustments it should consider in the future.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the U.S. government

needs more consistent development and execution of public engagement strategies for issues and regions across its foreign policy agenda; a State Department with less diffuse authority over public diplomacy and a stronger institutional capacity to perform at the highest level; and a Pentagon with stronger oversight over information operations and the public engagement activities of combatant commands, and a rebalanced relationship with civilian agencies. A comprehensive external review of U.S. broadcasting strategy and the Broadcasting Board of Governors as an organization is also needed.



## SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

*The purpose of this report is to assess rather than recommend specific policies or activities, something already done in more than 30 recent reports. Nonetheless, we make numerous specific recommendations in the course of our analysis. A few of these recommendations follow:*

- **Develop public engagement strategies in support of all major policy initiatives**, especially those identified in the forthcoming 2010 National Security Strategy.
- **Leverage renewed U.S. standing** in countries like Turkey, Indonesia and Brazil, where the popularity of the American president has not translated into greater cooperation with or changed policies toward the United States.
- **Devote more attention to following through on major policy speeches by the president**; lay the groundwork in advance and engage all relevant government agencies as well as the private sector.
- **Recognize President Obama's important role in public engagement**, but build the U.S. government's capacity for public engagement across agencies and in the field as well as in Washington.
- **Do not recreate a separate U.S. Information Agency** but do create a small, grant-giving non-profit organization to empower the private sector and support U.S. strategic public activities.
- **Conduct a major independent review of U.S. government broadcasting and the Broadcasting Board of Governors**; develop a strategy for the future. Make the chairmanship of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, an agency with a 700 million dollar budget, a full-time position.
- **Coordinate mutually reinforcing global engagement and counter-terrorism activities more effectively.**
- **Rebalance the roles of the Defense and State Departments in public engagement.**
- **Avoid the temptation to make the National Security Council an operational agency**; focus on setting a unified strategy and coordinating agencies across the government.
- **Develop, within the State Department, a more unified public engagement strategy and organization** that coordinates public affairs, public diplomacy, and countering violent extremist ideologies across the Department's many sources of power and with other government agencies.
- **Strengthen oversight over information operations at the Department of Defense.** Assess public engagement activities of the combatant commands and determine which public engagement functions are best left to civilian agencies.

## II. THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: AN OVERVIEW

*"I took office at a time when many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and distrust. Part of this was due to misperceptions and misinformation about my country. Part of this was due to opposition to specific policies, and a belief that on certain critical issues, America has acted unilaterally, without regard for the interests of others. And this has fed an almost reflexive anti-Americanism, which too often has served as an excuse for collective inaction."*

— President Obama, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 23, 2009

Barack Obama assumed the Presidency with a unique opportunity and a manifest intent to rebuild America's relationship with the rest of the world. As argued by opinion leaders across the U.S. political spectrum, America's global standing was in tatters due to an unpopular war in Iraq, a perception of unbridled American unilateralism and charges that the United States hypocritically advanced democracy abroad while compromising democratic values at home. By the close of former President George W. Bush's administration, the president was personally unpopular overseas, with only 2 percent of Turks, 7 percent of Pakistanis, 14 percent of Indonesians, 19 percent of Germans and 24 percent of Britons holding at least some confidence that he would do the right thing in world affairs.<sup>2</sup> President Obama promised a new beginning for America's relationship with the world, a vision for which foreign populations seemed to yearn.

The presidential transition created an opportunity for a new start. Although the tone and substance of U.S. foreign policy changed markedly between the first and second Bush administration, the world seemed not to notice. George W. Bush had become a symbol of the world's dismay with America, in some

ways unfairly so, and few around the world revised their views. Polls showed few significant shifts in foreign public opinion despite these changes in policy. This reality was reflected in the shrewd decision by the administration's final Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman, who played down efforts to improve America's image and instead focused on tarnishing al Qaeda. President Obama offered an opportunity to start over, reinforced by a unique personal story and a foreign policy vision centered upon engagement, dialogue, mutual interest and mutual respect.

President Obama moved quickly to translate this opportunity into action. His inaugural address offered a vision of a new American approach to the world. In his first week in office, the president announced that he would close the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, within a year, and he firmly rejected the language and rhetoric of the "global war on terror." He gave his first televised interview to an Arab television station, al-Arabiya, and later delivered a pre-recorded message directly to the Iranian people. He firmly committed to the responsible withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq, offered an outstretched hand to Iran and engaged directly and personally on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, President Obama delivered a series of ambitious speeches, most notably in Prague, Ghana, Cairo, Oslo and at the United Nations, and travelled to more foreign countries in his first year than any other president in history.<sup>3</sup> Each of these speeches was surrounded by a large-scale public engagement campaign, led by Washington but with heavy participation from embassy staffs worldwide, aimed at engaging indigenous populations.

In a sense, then, the Obama administration treated its first year as a "re-set" phase, "the beginning of the administration's efforts – not the end," in the words of Deputy National Security Adviser Benjamin J. Rhodes.<sup>4</sup> This was not only about popularity. The strategic logic was clear:

create openings for new policies that might have been rejected if advanced by the previous administration, leverage the President's personal popularity and the fresh start he offered, and lay the groundwork for an ambitious foreign policy agenda that would require global support. In particular, the Obama administration sought to:

- Enhance U.S. credibility and moral authority in the eyes of foreign populations.
- Reverse trends toward greater anti-Americanism and undercut efforts of adversaries to exploit that sentiment for their own purposes.
- Highlight shared interests and values in ways that would facilitate cooperation.
- Build people-to-people relationships that would form the basis of long-term partnerships.

Far more than a feel-good extra, public engagement was considered an essential foundation for diplomacy and a means of political leverage. The administration's gamble is that politics matters in the calculations of foreign leaders, including leaders of authoritarian states, and the new administration could leverage more favorable views of Obama personally and the United States generally to influence these calculations – or, at a minimum, to head off gratuitous opposition.

The president's personal commitment to engagement is shared by the major foreign policy principals in the administration. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have articulated a shared vision of "smart power" and have spoken often of the need to realize a "whole of government" approach to addressing foreign policy problems, an approach that incorporates public diplomacy and strategic communication.<sup>5</sup> Secretary Clinton has made public outreach a central part of her foreign visits, appearing on Indonesian talk shows, in a discussion in Doha televised by al-Jazeera, in Indian villages, in town hall-style

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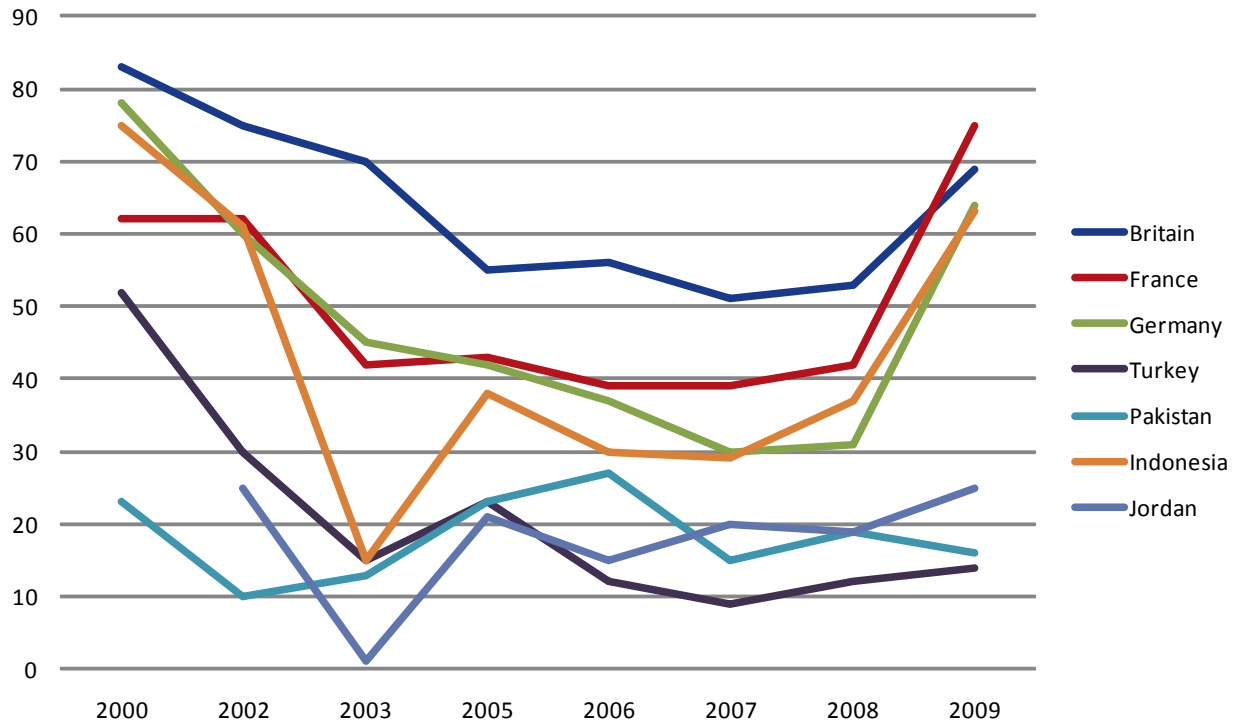
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meetings with Pakistani journalists, and at roundtables with students in Mexico, to name but a few examples.<sup>6</sup> She created an ambitious "social media" outreach office that reports directly to her. Adm. Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is an outspoken supporter of global public engagement and the need to rebuild American credibility overseas. Furthermore, the President appointed close advisors to senior strategic communications positions in his National Security Council.

More than one year into the new administration, there are signs that the president has succeeded in transforming at least some aspects of America's standing in the world. President Obama's personal popularity is high, and views of the United States have improved rapidly throughout much of the world – and, outside of the Arab world, have largely stayed there. Between February

Figure 2: Global Views of the United States in Select Countries from 2000-2009



Source: BBC World Service, "Global Views of United States Improve While Other Countries Decline" (18 April 2010).

and August of last year, approval of the United States increased by 33 percentage points in Bahrain, 19 in Kuwait, 12 in Egypt, and 10 in Morocco.<sup>7</sup> Outside the Middle East, favorable views increased by 33 points in Germany and France, 26 in Indonesia, 22 in Mexico, 16 in the United Kingdom, 15 in Brazil and Nigeria, and 14 in Argentina.<sup>8</sup> Gallup surveys show that overall global views of American leadership have risen by 17 points in the year Obama has been president.<sup>9</sup> President Obama's surprising selection for the Nobel Peace Prize demonstrated the hopes and aspirations placed upon him by wide swaths of the world, even if it mystified many Americans.

Having restored a more positive image of the United States, the administration is now embracing a role as a convener and global hub as part of its broader strategy of engagement. The Nuclear

Security Summit showed this at the traditional level of diplomacy, positioning President Obama at the center of a large gathering of world leaders united by shared norms and institutions. The Entrepreneurship Summit in April 2010 similarly saw the United States at the center of an emerging global network, with some 250 leading entrepreneurs from Muslim communities around the world converging on Washington to exchange ideas, build fruitful connections with each other and American business people, and to plan a range of follow-up activities focused on shared interests and opportunities. Though one attendee indicated a disappointing showing by American business entrepreneurs (as opposed to social entrepreneurs) at the Summit, these activities show promise. However, if the Obama administration continues to embrace its role as a global convener, it should be careful not to repeat the past mistake

## DEFINING STRATEGIC PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

As trained social scientists, we feel bound to define our terms. In the area of public engagement, we do so reluctantly. Far too much energy has been spent over the last few years in arguments over terms and definitions. Indeed, it is emblematic of the problems with this field that there is still no consensual definition for its core activities.

**Public diplomacy**, defined as the promotion of national interests through efforts to engage, persuade, and influence foreign publics, traditionally focused on long-term relationship building and a few core activities such as broadcasting, exchange programs, and publications. Many policy makers seeking support for their missions complain that traditional public diplomacy fails to adequately grapple with vital, urgent challenges to American interests.

**Public affairs**, which engages both domestic and foreign audiences, typically focuses on short-term efforts to engage the media and shape the 24-hour news cycle.<sup>1</sup> These efforts attract criticism for being too tactical and too focused on the short term, even when they are intended to be strategic and run out of the White House (e.g., the ill-fated Office of Global Communications in the early Bush administration).

**Strategic communication** is “an integrated process that includes the development, implementation, assessment and evolution of public messages actions in support of policies, interests, and long-term goals”<sup>2</sup>. As it is implemented in practice, however, it generally focuses on tactically supporting military or counterterrorism objectives (sometimes including information operations and/or covert psychological operations known as PSYOPS), with an implied subordination to short-term policy goals such as building support for the war in Iraq or fighting the “war of ideas” against al Qaeda. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen recently complained, the “strategic communication” rubric tends to substitute messaging for interaction and to prioritize short term mission requirements over the longer-term building of relationships and credibility.<sup>3</sup>

**While this is not how sophisticated public diplomacy, public affairs or strategic communication professionals would perceive their jobs, these terms have become tarnished and loaded.** The problem with all of these definitions is that in practice they are defined more by who executes the mission than by their objectives or methods. Public diplomacy, whatever its form, is seen as what the State Department does. Strategic communication, whatever its form, is viewed as what the Defense Department does. Public affairs, whatever its form, is seen as what offices carrying that name do, which is principally media relations. We therefore propose a master concept of “strategic public engagement,” the promotion of national interests through governmental efforts to inform, engage, and influence foreign populations. We prefer this term because it leapfrogs definitional debates and gets past bureaucratic turf wars, allowing policy makers to focus on what the U.S. government should be doing and *how* rather than *who* should be doing it. Strategic public engagement incorporates all of the American government’s deliberate communications with the rest of the world.

In our view, this term conveys the strategic and systematic use of engagement to achieve a foreign policy objective, not engagement as an end in itself. It entails a planned process, based on a carefully researched understanding of the audience and of its interests, couched in language calibrated to engage the audience in the intended manner, using the best one- or two-way method of engagement (whether a speech, an educational exchange program, social networking tools, an American Center, or a documentary produced by non-American filmmaker who shares an abhorrence for violent extremism even if he disagrees on other topics), as part of a larger strategy, and evaluated to determine if it is successful in advancing the intended goals.

1. DSB Task Force on Strategic Communication report (2008), 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 2.

3. Admiral Michael G. Mullen. “Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics.” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 55, (Fourth Quarter), 2009.

of appearing to put the United States at the center of every global challenge, focusing too much on “us” and not enough on “them.” And, ideally, the effort to promote entrepreneurship will soon see the U.S. government step out of the driver’s seat and shift momentum to the private sector. Nonetheless, these two initiatives are well chosen. They advance causes that carry tangible benefits for American security over the long term and simultaneously emphasize the positive role America can play in the world. This is the best of public engagement – positive action, in support of American interests, that also underscores the image America wishes for itself, and creates an environment more conducive to cooperation.

### Shortfalls and Challenges

Despite this auspicious beginning, as the administration entered its second year, there was a palpable sense that the Obama bubble had deflated.<sup>10</sup> The high expectations and hopes placed on the new President seemed to move from blessing to curse as the Obama Administration struggled to implement its ambitious agenda. A growing tide of opinion questions whether President Obama’s deeds will ever match the promise of his words, whether he tried to do too much at once, and whether he has even significantly changed the Bush administration’s policies. Some of these criticisms are exaggerated. But several problems are real and merit attention.

#### THE “SAY-DO” GAP

The Obama administration faces a new form of the well-worn “say-do gap,” the perceived distance between words and deeds that bedeviled the Bush administration’s communication efforts. Large swaths of world opinion viewed the Bush administration as hypocritical, advancing standards of democracy and human rights and the peaceful resolution of conflicts that it was unwilling to accept for itself.<sup>11</sup> This perception became so crippling that many foreign societies refused to listen to the Bush administration’s arguments and to assume

the worst about American intentions. This problem was acknowledged in the late years by the Bush administration, which found that the personal animosity toward President Bush was so deeply embedded across much (but certainly not all) of the world that it overshadowed admirable initiatives like the president’s commitment to fighting AIDS in Africa or combating human trafficking.

The Obama administration faces a different kind of “say-do gap”: a gap between promises and what is actually delivered. Having raised expectations on a wide range of issues, the United States is now paying the cost for failing to live up to its own rhetoric. Brilliant speeches and an ambitious policy agenda raised the hopes of the world but at the cost of racing beyond the ability of American diplomacy to deliver. To be clear, the problem is *not* that President Obama has failed to transform the world overnight, which would prove an impossible test and which neither he nor his advisors expected. It is that he has fallen short of the litmus tests he created for himself, such as promising to close the prison at Guantanamo within a year. It is that he failed to sufficiently set in motion the many bureaus, embassies, combatant commands and other parts of the U.S. government, and the countless private businesses, non-governmental organizations, media organizations, and professional societies outside the U.S. government to implement the vision he presented.<sup>12</sup>

Some conclude that the administration should not have over-promised, and should not have gone so far to distinguish itself from the outgoing administration. This criticism is not warranted. Making the most of the change from President Bush to President Obama to reap the strategic benefits of a fresh start *required* laying out bold markers to highlight the differences. **On issues ranging from arms control and the environment to Middle East peace and the relationship with the Islamic world, President Obama could only fully harvest the benefits of change by staking out clear, dramatic new paths.**

Still, the administration has suffered the consequences of raising expectations beyond what it could deliver and for not responding as well as it might have to circumstances it could not control, but potentially could have influenced — like the rapidly evolving domestic politics in Iran and Pakistan, or the grim stalemate that stymied the push for Israeli-Palestinian peace.<sup>13</sup> And at times, the administration is suffering from its failure to take public opinion sufficiently into account. In authoritarian countries like Kyrgyzstan, protecting American interests like the U.S. air base in Manas at the expense of not publicly criticizing an oppressive regime appeared a reasonable and pragmatic policy — until the day the revolution started and opposition forces won. In key theaters like Yemen and Pakistan, the use of drone strikes in support of important counter-terrorism objectives has risked inflaming public opposition and undermining support for the broader mission. The administration has sought to minimize this fall-out by using ever more precise weapons and embedding more aggressive military tactics in a more holistic strategy. The risk remains nonetheless.

Midway through Obama's second year in office, the administration now has to confront the rising cost of this pattern of bold commitments followed by limited delivery. Administration officials argue that this is more a problem of perception than of reality: as in the debate over health care reform, they suggest, the president sets out ambitious goals which then are accomplished through hard work and persistence. The perceived pattern has undermined American credibility and limited reception to new presidential rhetoric, which always faced a natural limit — particularly in the Arab world, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict weighs heavily in local views of U.S. credibility.

The potential temptation is to respond by upping the ante, promising “jobs in the Middle East” or an Israeli-Palestinian final status peace agreement. This would simply defer the problem and

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raise the stakes in the “say-do” gap, which is poison to credibility in any domain. People need to see the United States delivering on its promises or they will begin to tune out even the most stirring rhetoric. One solution would, of course, be simply to achieve more policy successes. Short of that, a communications strategy should systematically and consistently engage and explain to people abroad the administration's long-term strategy, where it serves mutual interests, and any progress made. No policy or follow-up activity will change minds if intended audiences do not know about it.

#### TACTICAL ENGAGEMENT

Another challenge to the administration's approach is striking the right balance between the long-term building of new relationships with foreign populations, (for instance through educational and professional exchanges) and the short-term demands of tactical strategic communication. The Obama administration certainly considers its post-Cairo efforts to build relations in the fields of science, education, and entrepreneurship to be strategic, in that they contribute to building the long-term foundation for healthier relationships between American and Muslim societies and help to marginalize extremists by shoring up populations potentially at risk to radicalization.

*The administration also continues to struggle with a more longstanding problem in U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communication: weak institutions, weak coordination across agencies and inadequate resources relative to the mission.*

Yet, the administration has at times seemed less interested in designing tactically focused public engagement campaigns aimed at achieving specific goals or engaging specific audiences or geographic regions.<sup>14</sup> It has shown little inclination to leverage its popularity to gain political advantage: in rising powers such as Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey, where the President is popular; in Japan, where trust in the United States to do the right thing in world affairs jumped from 25 percent to 85 percent between 2008 and 2009;<sup>15</sup> and in Israel, where the United States failed to reach out to the “peace camp” and lost control of the president’s image to the point where Prime Minister Netanyahu gained rather than suffered from an open confrontation with him. There are exceptions. For instance, though it was slow to emerge, the administration developed a carefully designed interagency public engagement strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, this highly focused effort in a theater of conflict is the exception to what seems a wider rule.

#### WEAK INSTITUTIONS, INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES

The administration also continues to struggle with a more longstanding problem in U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communication: weak institutions, weak coordination across agencies and inadequate resources relative to the mission. While calling for a “whole of government” approach has become an all-purpose mantra in policy circles, translating it into practice remains a challenge. As discussed in detail in section III, ongoing problems within and between different arms of the U.S. government continue to frustrate efforts at executing a well-coordinated, effective engagement strategy. Though President Obama will be an important asset as long as he remains popular with foreign audiences, no president’s personal popularity is sufficient to invite long-term success. President Obama, and all American presidents who succeed him, need well-functioning, well-funded public engagement institutions to advance American policy interests, both in Washington and at embassies, consulates, combatant commands, and other U.S. government outposts overseas.

The challenge for the administration is now to capitalize on the new opportunities it has created for itself and address the perceived gap between promise and action. If not addressed, this gap will diminish the Obama administration’s own success in restoring American credibility and carry long-term consequences for American interests. The Obama administration still has time to head off this negative perception and capitalize on the new start it has generated for America. The administration has successfully charted a new course. Now it must follow through.

#### Defining Strategic Public Engagement

Engagement is a pillar of President Obama’s foreign policy. Indeed, to the extent there is an “Obama Doctrine,” comprehensive engagement is one of its guiding principles, viewed at the highest levels as a crucial means to achieve a broader



set of foreign policy objectives.<sup>16</sup> Engagement — which encompasses tools as disparate as negotiations, dialogue, consultation, network building and public diplomacy — is central to the administration’s policy on nearly every priority issue, whether Iran, Pakistan, arms control, or climate change.<sup>17</sup> This paper focuses on *one* dimension of this general principle: the effort to engage, inform, and persuade foreign publics to advance U.S. national interests. We call this effort *strategic public engagement*; others prefer the more familiar terms of “public diplomacy” or “strategic communication.” (See *Defining Strategic Public Engagement* on page 11) It is public because it involves reaching out to populations, not just governments overseas. And it is engagement because it is a two-way process, an ongoing interaction, rather than a one-way message aimed exclusively at influencing foreign populations. Understanding foreign publics is a central part of strategic communication. Crucially, it is conceived as a full-scale interaction, dealing with a wide range of issues of shared interest and concern (as diverse as economic opportunity and disease prevention).

This concept of strategic public engagement, by whatever name, was not invented by the new administration. It is the product of years of hard-earned experience and sustained thought inside and outside the U.S. government. Because of this gradual process, it is jarring to consider the enormous changes between 2002 and 2010. The early Bush administration saw itself engaged in a “war of ideas” against radical Islam and combating an anti-Americanism grounded in a deep opposition to American values rather than a political response to American foreign policy. Its public diplomacy was perceived by much of the world as too much lecturing and moralizing rhetoric, focused on message control and influencing target audiences, and too little consultation, listening, and dialogue. This characterization was in fact something of a

caricature, but in the aftermath of the war on terror and invasion of Iraq, people in many foreign countries were primed to see the worst.

By the last years of the Bush administration, however, this approach had changed dramatically. Thinking on strategic communication (as on so many foreign policy issues) matured rapidly across the U.S. government, which began to pay far more attention to the ideas and attitudes of the targeted audiences and put far more effort into encouraging feedback. The last years of the Bush administration saw the re-conceptualization of public engagement to focus not just on one-way “messaging” but also on building relationships, two-way communication and the need to support credible third-party voices instead of putting the United States at the center of every dialogue.<sup>18</sup> James K. Glassman, its last Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, emerged as a passionate advocate of what he called “Public Diplomacy 2.0.” rooted in Internet-based dialogues.<sup>19</sup> American officials returned to al-Jazeera after years of de facto boycott, while public diplomacy leaders eagerly embraced the potential of the Internet and public-private partnerships. This change has been so widely accepted across party and organizational lines that few now recognize its importance or its extent.<sup>20</sup>

The turn to this listener-centric concept of strategic communication is rooted in practical experience. Navigating the new global information environment requires a concerted focus on listening and on conversation, rather than on controlling messages. The administration’s primary statement of its strategic communication strategy to date begins from the assertion that the United States must “do a better job understanding the attitudes, opinions, grievances, and concerns of peoples — not just elites — around the world.”<sup>21</sup> This attempts to appeal to audiences in ways that resonate with them, not just us, and

to listen and understand relevant audiences on their own terms. The administration built upon its predecessor's evolution into an engagement-oriented approach to strategic communication, with a particular emphasis on understanding foreign publics and on synchronizing words and deeds. It also attempted to broaden engagement well beyond a "counter-terrorism" focus to engage wider publics on a broader range of issues, and to institutionalize the new concept across the whole of government.

The concept of strategic public engagement that seems to drive the Obama administration stems from the recognition of the rising power of foreign populations and the dramatic shifts in how information flows in today's world. Mobilizing public support abroad is not just about being liked – it can help to achieve foreign policy objectives, or at least head off active opposition. Publics have always been powerful; indeed, Benjamin Franklin sought to build popular support in Europe for the American revolutionaries. However, due to the spread of democracy, information and communication technologies, and changing global norms, the latent power of publics has grown exponentially. New media and information technologies, like social networking and Internet-capable cell phones, have transformed the dynamics of communication and interaction across the world and opened up new opportunities for genuine global engagement. Coupled with 24-hour television news broadcasts, this trend makes information accessible to wider and wider audiences and puts world leaders under unprecedented scrutiny. Under these conditions, words, tone and speed matter more than ever before.<sup>22</sup>

**The imperative to listen and engage with foreign publics does not mean that foreign opinion should drive American foreign policy.** The United States must protect its own interests and promote its own agenda. At times that will

lead the United States to pursue policies that are unpopular – and that is both expected and proper. The goal is not simply to be liked. *It is to be more influential and therefore more effective at lower cost.*<sup>23</sup> In a world where foreign public opinion has ever greater impact on the success or failure of vital American national interests, it should be weighed in making policy decisions and should shape *how* the United States pursues its policies and how U.S. leaders talk about American policies. Listening, understanding and engaging makes for better policy, helps to avoid unnecessary conflicts, and should ideally allow policymakers to foresee and pre-empt objections to policies that sound worse in the field than they do in Washington.

There is no contradiction between public engagement and hard-nosed diplomacy, even with hostile or unpleasant regimes. The administration has held up the iconic Ronald Reagan, who energetically engaged Soviet leaders and publics behind the Iron Curtain, to show the effectiveness of reaching out to even the most oppressive regimes while simultaneously engaging their people.<sup>24</sup> It has rejected the view that the United States should not both engage the Iranian people and negotiate with the regime, or that it could not both reach out to Muslims and combat al Qaeda. Engagement should not be held hostage to the actions of the extremist fringe or to the demands of authoritarian regimes. The administration's engagement effort sought to change the terms of the relationship, away from exclusively focusing on the hot-button political issues that divide and toward the broad swath of economic and social interests that could unite.

**The effects of strategic public engagement will rarely be felt in a single, dramatic outcome.** Instead, they shape the environment in which political leaders operate. When American standing is high and its president and policies popular, then political leaders will stand to gain from

aligning with the United States and risk political harm if they do not. When American standing is low, the incentives reverse, and political leaders gain by distancing themselves from America and suffer through association. Thus, during Operation Desert Storm, the first Bush administration was able to assemble an overwhelming international coalition to liberate Kuwait and to maintain it in support of a push for Arab-Israeli peace. In 2002-03, by contrast, the administration of President George W. Bush was unable to muster international support for the invasion of Iraq, while political leaders such as Gerhard Schroeder in Germany scored political victories by publicly opposing the United States. In 2010, 47 world leaders (the most since the founding of the United Nations) enthusiastically converged on Washington for the nuclear summit, jockeying for public meetings with President Obama that would presumably be popular with their own publics. It is difficult to imagine a similar gathering during the Bush administration.

In assessing the success of public engagement strategies, therefore, it is important to recognize both the limits and potential of this nebulous instrument of statecraft. Public engagement is no silver bullet. If policies are unpopular, no amount of snazzy marketing will make them beloved. If national interests are fundamentally at odds, then no amount of dialogue will align them. Public engagement can only hope to explain the motivation behind unpopular policies (for instance, that U.S. attacks on al Qaeda are intended to counter terrorism not evidence of an American war on Islam), put them in context, and highlight the many areas where interests and values do overlap. Public engagement is also used most effectively in concert with other instruments of power, as a sort of diplomatic force-multiplier that can amplify the impact of agile diplomacy, effective development activities, and successful military

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operations. Battlefield success may win public support but only if those publics sense a changing tide and enemies are not able to manipulate information in images to challenge that perception. In diplomacy, effective public engagement can play a *preventive* role, allowing the United States to shape and articulate its policies in ways that head off opposition before it arises. Finally, public engagement provides policy makers with options when other instruments of statecraft are severely constrained. Force is a blunt instrument and can only be applied, or even threatened, to good effect in a relatively narrow set of circumstances. Diplomacy must confront the political context in which foreign leaders act, a political context that potentially can be shaped through public engagement. Where diplomatic relations are strained, as with Iran, reaching out directly to a country's people opens new opportunities to shape the broader relationship.

President Obama's national security team has set out to ensure that strategic public engagement matters in foreign policy, that it is taken seriously in policymaking and integrated in an anticipatory fashion to avoid preventable disasters. Public diplomacy veterans will recognize this ideal — immortalized by the journalist and

U.S. Information Agency director Edward R. Murrow's remark that he wanted to be in on the take-offs, not just the crash landings — as a goal long sought, but never achieved.<sup>25</sup> The same could be said of the administration's ambition to bring together all relevant agencies, domestic and foreign policy alike, to coordinate strategic public engagement across the whole of government. As the issues discussed below in more depth suggest, delivery has not yet matched the ideal. The administration thus far has done much better at policy roll-outs than at either proactively shaping the environment with an eye toward the future or following up on the bold policy statements and principles laid out in speeches.

**In short, the philosophy behind the administration's approach to strategic public engagement is sound, even if key problems remain unresolved.** If sustained throughout the administration, the pay-off should be greater support for a wide variety of foreign policy objectives.

### III. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the administration's performance, we briefly assess the strategic public engagement dimension of several discrete areas of U.S. foreign policy. **We examine three key policy areas — U.S.-Muslim World relations, combating violent extremism and democracy and human rights — and four key countries — Iran, China Afghanistan and Pakistan.** It is vital to emphasize that in most cases, *it is too soon* to assess the success or failure of these efforts. The administration has faced a daunting set of challenges abroad, as well as having to manage an economic disaster while pursuing a difficult domestic political agenda. It understands these challenges as long-term ones, and its public engagement reflects this. No administration could reasonably be expected to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Iranian nuclear issue or reverse a decade of tense relations with the Muslim world in its first 18 months. It has demonstrated persistence in its pursuit of these objectives in the face of significant resistance and limited early returns. Yet some lessons can be gleaned from the record to date — and there is time for the administration to adapt and adjust.

#### THE TOOLS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

*U.S. government officials have countless ways to inform, engage, and influence foreign publics in support of foreign policy objectives. To be used for best effect, these tools of public engagement should be selected carefully and used in concert with each. An illustrative list follows.*

##### One-way communication

- Speeches
- Broadcasting
- Media Interviews
- Web-pages
- Print publications
- Signs and advertising
- Exhibits

##### Two-way communication

- Town Halls
- Internet chat and blogs
- Social networking
- Call-in shows
- Track II dialogues
- Conferences

##### Relationship-building

- Professional exchanges
- International visitor programs
- Art and cultural exchanges
- Speaker programs
- Educational exchanges

## Outreach to Muslim Societies

*"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles — principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."*

— President Barack Obama, Cairo, June 2009

One of the Obama administration's first challenges was to begin to rebuild relations with the world's Muslim populations, relations that had deteriorated precipitously in the new millennium. The rebuilding effort began from the belief that America's relations with 1.4 billion Muslims around the world could not forever be defined by the lens of counter-terrorism. The administration sought to:

- Signal a clear break with the past administration, which had become not only unpopular but also distrusted by most of the world's Muslims.
- Develop a broader based relationship with over one billion members of the world's population who, while extremely diverse, also share a common religious and cultural bond.
- Positively engage a bulging new generation of Muslim young people, who are key to the long-term stability of regions critically important to the United States.
- Build a foundation for addressing shared challenges such as the protection of human rights, economic development, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

President Obama's Cairo speech to the Muslim world epitomized the potential of strategic public engagement. The speech itself was a classic piece of presidential public diplomacy, a global spectacle that focused the world's attention on

a finely-crafted speech followed by two-way engagement via social media and face-to-face interactions at embassies. It sought both to organize a wide-ranging relationship with the Muslim world across a broad spectrum of areas of common interest such as education, jobs, and opportunity and to pursue a keen strategic purpose of marginalizing al Qaeda and rebuilding America's standing in the Muslim world. To do so, it illustrated the shared interests of Muslim societies and the United States in countering violent extremists, rhetorically uniting them in the fight against terrorism and countering the idea that Americans see Muslims only through a lens of terrorism. Importantly, it also extended the discussion of shared interests and values far beyond terrorism to include science, education, and entrepreneurship — even as it acknowledged real differences. The speech directly addressed the political issues of primary concern to many Muslims it hoped to reach, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The process of shaping and then disseminating the speech also worked well. With the coordination of the NSC and with a leading role for the State Department's Policy Planning staff, all relevant government agencies contributed to shaping its themes and language. Outside experts contributed their views, and input on attitudes and opinions in the targeted countries was carefully evaluated in advance. Finally, this speech was followed by a campaign-like effort to continue the dialogue via embassy-organized sessions and on social media, and to implement long-term programs that built on the relationships and interests outlined by the speech. To effectively engage young people, who make up large percentages of their respective populations, the Obama administration chose to focus on science, technology, education and entrepreneurship and using social-networking technologies and text messages, both of which are widely used by young Muslims.

The aftermath of the Cairo speech also demonstrates the limitations of the administration's efforts to date. Many Muslims chafed at the absence of rapid, visible follow-up.<sup>26</sup> Muslims abroad expected actions — not plans — in the days and months that followed the speech. When they saw little follow-through in the short term, and public debate quickly turned to the stand-off over Israeli settlements, views of the Cairo overture appear to have rapidly soured. The label of “words without deeds,” once it sticks, is difficult to remove.

The administration argues that it has in fact met many of the promises it made in the speech and, in any event, the objective was to start building a long-term relationship not launch a series of new initiatives. It has adhered to its commitment to a responsible withdrawal from Iraq in the face of turbulence and some pressure to relax its timetable, and has crafted an effective message on the need to transition to true Iraqi sovereignty. It has actively sought Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, paying significant domestic and international political costs despite little immediate progress. It fulfilled another of its promises by appointing White House staffer Rashad Hussain to be the American envoy to the Organization of Islamic Countries. Administration officials, like Farah Pandith, Special Representative to the Muslim World (a political appointee who stayed on from the Bush administration), have traveled widely as they seek to build new networks and programs to realize the new vision. The administration expanded business and education exchange programs, announced a global entrepreneurship summit, started a fund to support technological development in Muslim-majority countries, appointed science envoys and launched health initiatives, including a new global effort to eradicate polio. Embassies around the world continue to emphasize reaching out to Muslims. Finally, in April 2010, Secretary Clinton announced a new initiative called Partners for a

New Beginning, which will engage the considerable resources, capabilities and expertise of the U.S. private sector to support activities laid out in the Cairo speech. Among other components, the new initiative will encourage companies to contribute equipment or technology to new centers of scientific excellence that the U.S. government is launching in many predominantly Muslim countries or partnerships between U.S. and foreign universities to improve business education.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, follow-up activities rolled out so far have received little publicity and have not been crafted into, or perceived as, a coherent and persuasive narrative of ongoing robust engagement.<sup>28</sup> There has been no sustained, ongoing campaign to inform either Americans or foreign Muslims of progress on these programs. Until the recent Entrepreneurship Summit and Partners for a New Beginning, there had been no major roll-outs of new programs to refocus attention, and it is not clear how much attention either program, launched in Washington, garnered overseas. It is difficult to change perceptions when few are aware of the activities. Frustrated administration officials complain that the administration has not had sufficient time to fundamentally change how the government does business, and that the media ignore their substantive accomplishments to date. But in a fundamental way, such complaints miss the point: when the goal is to change the narrative, a failure to change the narrative can only be judged as...a failure. The administration may still be successful in changing the narrative over the longer term, but it has not achieved that goal yet.

The reception of the Cairo speech, marked first by hope and then by disappointment, shows the difficulty of changing the narrative and the importance of listening to what the intended audiences consider important. Arabs viewed the speech through the lens of specific policies, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and watched carefully for evidence that the

administration was both credible and capable of delivering on its promises. Administration officials appeared frustrated that the Cairo speech got hijacked by the ensuing public battle over Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Yet they should learn from the fact that it did. President Obama was correct to directly tackle the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the Cairo speech and to commit the United States to a sustained, active role. The Cairo speech could not have succeeded without such a clear message on how the United States would address the Palestinian issue. Even though the administration correctly identifies a wide range of issues where the United States and Muslims could cooperate to mutual advantage, the settlements issue, rightly or wrongly, remains a litmus test for U.S. credibility with Arab audiences. Though Arabs in general and young Arabs in particular are highly concerned with issues like jobs and education, Arab media and the political elite are consumed by the peace process; they treat it as an index of American credibility, and will not allow it to be sidestepped in favor of even the worthiest of other programs.

The president's Cairo speech was arguably the highlight of his strategic public engagement efforts to date. However, it could have had greater impact if the preparation had been done in advance in order to allow new initiatives to be introduced quickly to capture the momentum. Similarly, the demand for an Israeli settlement freeze in advance of negotiations with the Palestinians was well communicated and effectively integrated into a wider regional strategy. However, little was done to engage Israeli public opinion in advance in order to build support for such a move, and there seemed to be no plan B when the Netanyahu government refused to agree. As a result, the administration lost a great deal of credibility and goodwill on both sides of the struggle. Finally, the disconnect between this broad-based Muslim outreach and more

traditional counter-terrorism and "combating violent extremism" efforts (see below) has proven challenging both inside the government and in the public debate. Though policy disagreements will persist, the United States can hope to start a shift in Muslim perceptions regarding American motives and trustworthiness that will influence whether those disagreements are seen as discrete points of departure or chapters in a decades-long story of betrayal.

### **Combating Violent Extremism**

The Obama administration sought to reframe America's relationship with the world's Muslims, moving away from the "Global War on Terror" that defined the post-9/11 Bush administration (even after the administration itself tried to abandon the term, indicating the stubborn "stickiness" of public perceptions). This meant detaching the broad-based global engagement efforts from major ongoing efforts focused on combating violent extremism. Even as the administration accelerated Predator strikes against al Qaeda targets and escalated the military and, to a lesser extent, the civilian commitment to Afghanistan, President Obama's engagement with the Muslim world explicitly aimed to broaden the relationship and not frame it primarily in terms of what administration officials have called the "distorting lens" of counter-terrorism. President Obama's team, as the Bush administration came to accept in its final years, understood the urgent need to prevent the consolidation of a "clash of civilizations" narrative that empowers extremists on both sides. To combat violent extremism, the administration seeks to:

- Undercut al Qaeda's global prominence by reducing its centrality in official U.S. government rhetoric while continuing or expanding concrete actions to destroy and degrade its network.
- Drive a wedge between Muslim populations and violent Islamist extremists to deprive the latter

of support and succor, in order to isolate and marginalize extremists from their own societies, each other, and global Muslim populations.

- Understand the local drivers of extremism and tailor specific approaches to countering the appeal of extremist ideas at the national and local levels.
- Undermine a narrative of American perfidy and Muslim victimhood that attracts money, recruits and sympathy to extremist causes, and conclusively reject the narrative of an America at war with Islam.
- Support or give space to credible, indigenous voices that refute violent Islamist narratives and take the United States out of the center of such debates.

The new approach to countering violent extremism, therefore, focused not on al Qaeda per se but on marginalizing “violent extremists” while engaging broader audiences. As White House Counter-Terrorism Advisor John Brennan put it, “Rather than looking at allies and other nations through the narrow prism of terrorism, whether they are with us or against us, the administration is now engaging other countries and people across a broader range of areas.”<sup>29</sup> The guiding principle was to isolate and marginalize extremists, rather than magnify their voices, while offering a positive American message rooted in common interests and deflating the perception of a Western war on Islam. The focus on “violent extremism” rather than on al Qaeda or radical Islam fit comfortably in this rhetorical strategy – moving away from a “war of ideas” that focused attention upon religion and elevated al Qaeda’s status.

The administration continued to counter extremist narratives across old and new media environments, and built on the initiatives of the last years of the Bush administration to empower, support and amplify credible voices inside the Muslim world speaking out against extremism. It also sought

to harness other foreign policy tools, like development, in support of the mission of combating violent extremism. The director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center, Michael Leiter, argues that the single largest area of growth over the last few years “involves deeper causes and root causes of radicalization and terrorism” in order to more effectively counter extremist messaging.<sup>30</sup>

The decision not to see the Muslim world through the lens of terrorism has led Obama administration officials to separate global engagement and public diplomacy from efforts to counter violent extremism and the spread of terrorist ideologies. In so doing, some argue privately that the Obama administration has over-corrected in playing down violent extremism and now must take steps to link the two efforts as appropriate without undermining the objective of winning broader Muslim. This over-correction is reflected in government agencies, where global engagement and counter-terrorism staffs are reportedly reluctant partners. The determination to avoid framing relations with Muslims in terms of counterterrorism frame led to hesitation about linking efforts to counter violent extremism with broader public diplomacy, despite the obvious strategic relationship. The problems are fundamental: after all, though the United States and Muslim societies around the world may share many interests, the reason the United States is engaging specifically with *Muslim* communities abroad, and not nations or regions, is a concern about Islamist extremism and terrorism directed at Americans in the United States and overseas.

Over the last several years, the U.S. government has taken a more disaggregated and indirect approach to countering terrorism. Overall, this approach appears to be succeeding in confounding al Qaeda’s communications strategy, as evidenced by the growing Muslim condemnations of its methods and ideology.<sup>31</sup> With the United States government taking a less prominent role, Muslim voices increasingly stepped forward — with or



without support from Western or Muslim governments — to challenge al Qaeda and other violent extremists. Notably, al Qaeda was instrumental in marginalizing itself. In the last years of the Bush administration, the carnage in Iraq and terrorist attacks killing innocent Muslims, as well as al Qaeda's public battles with more popular Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, alienated much of the Muslim mainstream. Al Qaeda continues to struggle in the Arab world, and shows few signs of regaining ground lost over the last few years. Meanwhile, the administration's kinetic operations are enjoying success in "seriously disrupting al Qaeda."<sup>32</sup> An engagement strategy bolsters this effort by peeling away support — even if those focused on broader public engagement shy away from the counter-terrorism dimension.

At the same time, the extremist threat has evolved into different forms — especially domestic radicalization and recruitment in English and spread in specific theaters like Pakistan and Somalia. Al Qaeda affiliates such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb began to step up as global threats in their own right. The administration needs to do more to gain the initiative on countering violent extremism in those arenas, but without surrendering its winning strategy in the broader Muslim and Arab worlds. This requires coordination and careful strategizing across agencies and across groups in those agencies that deal with both public diplomacy and positive engagement on the one hand and countering terrorism and violent extremism on the other. It is not necessary to separate these two tracks to protect President Obama's core strategic agenda of broadening the relationship with the Muslim world beyond terrorism. And it could be counterproductive if the two efforts work at cross purposes or fail to take advantage of obvious synergies.

The administration's communication strategy has at times proved difficult to maintain. The failed Christmas Day bombing and the killing

of 13 people and wounding of 30 others by a radicalized American Muslim at Fort Hood, Tex., generated considerable domestic pressure to refocus on Islamist extremism.<sup>33</sup> Faced with mounting domestic political criticism and a media frenzy, the administration responded with rhetoric that seemed aimed more at assuaging public opinion than driving a wedge between broad Muslim publics and violent extremists. Official communications seemed reactive and in tension with the earlier strategy. After some shaky steps, the administration reaffirmed its core strategy and has restored its balance. Nonetheless, the pressures of domestic politics and the administration's initial reaction demonstrate the difficulty of adhering to even a well-crafted new engagement strategy when faced with entrenched narratives and domestic political opposition.

### Democracy and Human Rights

*"I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere."*

— President Barack Obama, Cairo, June 2009

Perhaps the one area where the Obama administration has been criticized for saying too little in its approach to democracy and human rights. The administration chose to de-emphasize democracy in its public rhetoric and public diplomacy programming, even as its funding for programs such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative actually increased.<sup>34</sup> A wide range of critics from the left and right bemoan the administration's reluctance to offer the full-throated calls for democracy that characterized the Bush administration's public diplomacy.

The critics also lament what they perceive as the Obama administration's tendency to construe national interests narrowly, in ways that marginalize human rights. To promote democracy and human rights, the Obama administration appears to be pursuing the following objectives:

- Voice support for political pluralism and human rights, but tone down calls for democracy to avoid promising more than can be delivered, as well as the appearance of meddling and tainting dissidents as American pawns.
- Promote good governance and political freedoms through quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy and support for civil society.

President Obama's approach to rhetoric about democracy reflects the lessons his team learned from the Bush administration's experience with over-promising and under-delivering. While the previous administration advocated for democracy often and committed substantial funding to democracy-promotion initiatives, especially in the Middle East, its efforts ultimately foundered. The high point of the administration's public democracy advocacy probably came with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's powerful speech to the American University of Cairo in the spring of 2005 apologizing for decades of American preference for stability over democracy. However, the success of Islamist in Egyptian and Palestinian elections in 2005 and 2006, respectively, led the Bush administration to back away from supporting democracy in practice, at least in the eyes of Arab people. Many Arabs agreed with the need for democracy but did not find the Bush administration a credible or attractive partner in such efforts — and they (correctly) doubted that the United States would actually sacrifice its interests to promote democracy. To be fair, the Bush administration promoted democracy in countries like Ukraine consistently and with less fanfare. Nonetheless, the administration focused on promoting

democracy in the Middle East, and it is for these activities that it will be most remembered.

President Obama's team argues that both democracy and human rights — two related but separate agendas — can better be promoted quietly through institutional development and diplomacy, without attention-getting rhetoric. The fate of the previous administration's "Freedom Agenda" is taken as an object lesson in the kind of over-promising and under-delivery of which the current administration is now accused. The Obama administration, therefore, chose to focus on building relationships based on common interest and mutual respect, emphasizing civil society, human rights and development, rather than on promoting democracy per se. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech on Internet freedom — pointedly timed after Google accounts of Chinese dissidents were hacked — focused on building the foundations for the free flow of information and her speeches have generally played down the role of elections. President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech pointedly noted that "the promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone."<sup>35</sup> In that acceptance speech, he defended "engagement with repressive regimes" even if it "lacks the satisfying purity of indignation" because "sanctions without outreach — condemnation without discussion — can carry forward only a crippling status quo." As a result of this approach, the administration has been criticized for soft-pedaling democracy.

This approach offers an important test of the power and role of strategic public engagement. Does the Obama administration's reticence on democracy open the space for more effective efforts beneath the radar, or does it forgo an important instrument for advancing American values and interests in the world? Will publics find the administration's relatively lower profile in advocating democracy to be more appealing

and ultimately more effective, even though it lacks drama, or see it as a sign that the United States no longer cares about democracy and is willing to sacrifice their freedom for smoother political relations with autocratic rulers? When autocratic governments fall, as in Kyrgyzstan, will the people criticize America's failure to speak out against oppression, or recall America's restraint and appreciate respect for their sovereignty? It is difficult to judge this early in the administration. Time will tell whether the Obama administration has corrected for the mistakes of the previous administration — or over-corrected.

## Iran

*"The United States does not meddle in Iran's internal affairs. Our commitment — our responsibility — is to stand up for those rights that should be universal to all human beings. That includes the right to speak freely, to assemble without fear; the right to the equal administration of justice, and to express your views without facing retribution against you or your families."*

— President Obama, *Nowruz Greeting to the Iranian People*, March 20, 2010

The Obama administration came to office with an ambitious plan to engage the Islamic Republic of Iran in pursuit of an agreement on its nuclear weapons program and cooperation to address wider regional security challenges. This involved a two-track strategy, of first attempting to engage with Iran while also preparing the ground with the international community to support sanctions or even military action, should engagement fail. The United States needed to simultaneously change the tone of its relations with Iran without causing Iran's neighbors — from Israel to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf — to worry about America's determination to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. One of President Obama's most significant early

acts of strategic public engagement was his effort to engage the Iranian people directly, an effort soon complicated by a disputed Iranian election and the rise of the opposition Green Movement. In its efforts to engage the Iranian public, the administration sought to:

- Temper long-standing public animosity toward the United States and create political space for engagement with the regime.
- Prevent the regime from using anti-American sentiment as a convenient excuse for rejecting cooperation with the United States.
- Avoid undermining the Green Movement by publicly aligning with protesters.
- Build international support for sanctions, or even military force, should negotiations over the nuclear issue fail.

As a first major step, in March 2009 President Obama issued a special video message wishing the Iranian people a happy Nowruz, the traditional Persian celebration of spring and renewal.<sup>36</sup> He spoke with a tone of respect and asked the Iranian people to think about a more peaceful future marked by renewed person-to-person exchanges and trade. Yet this future, he underscored, would require Iran to make a choice.

The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right — but it comes with real responsibilities, and that place cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization. And the measure of that greatness is not the capacity to destroy, it is your demonstrated ability to build and create.<sup>37</sup>

This speech was released on the White House Web site, widely reported in the media, and further disseminated through YouTube (which

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*Time will tell whether the Obama administration has corrected for the mistakes of the previous administration — or over-corrected.*

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is blocked in Iran) and Farsi-language television stations based outside Iran. The message was then underscored by the administration's offer to participate in direct talks with Iran over its nuclear program and reaffirmation in the Cairo speech of Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy.

The engagement strategy had multiple objectives. It sought to remove the venom from a poisoned relationship, offering the proverbial open hand and giving the regime fewer excuses for not cooperating with the United States. Simultaneously, it sought to build support in the international community for sanctions or military strikes should Iran not respond in the negotiations, and to weaken the hand of hard-liners inside Iran. This balancing act would have posed a challenge to any administration's strategic communication. This was even more problematic in the face of a hawkish Congress and skeptical American public, with which the administration also had to communicate, and Iran's own domestic contest for political legitimacy.

Maintaining a coherent message in such an environment, challenging from the beginning, became virtually impossible after the June 2009 presidential election, which reinstated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and unleashed a series of huge protests that continue to this day. The Iranian protests against the flawed election, which became known as the Green Movement, posed a devilish policy and communications

problem for an administration that wanted to support the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people, not undermine the protesters by making them appear the pawns of American intervention, and to get on with urgent negotiations on the nuclear question.

In responding to the Green Movement, the administration at first opted to keep a low profile, out of the judgment — which we deem to be correct — that overt American support could have hurt the Iranian Green Movement more than it helped. As the protests continued, but the regime nonetheless consolidated control, the Obama administration opted to proceed with nuclear negotiations while using increasingly sharp language against the Iranian regime's repression of its protestors — a choice that we also deem correct. **The challenge for the administration now is to adapt to new circumstances. It has continued to walk a tightrope, unsure how much it helps or harms the Green Movement by speaking out against human rights abuses.** As it becomes ever more apparent that Iran will not willingly abandon its nuclear program, the administration must rebalance its strategic public engagement to build support for sanctions and stand for human rights, while not undermining the domestic legitimacy of the Green Movement.

The belief that social media played a prominent role in the Iranian protests — the so-called Twitter Revolution — posed a direct challenge and opportunity to an administration that had emphasized Internet freedoms and Internet-based engagement. Support for Internet access allowed one route for the United States to assist the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people without directly implicating the Green Movement. Numerous commentaries have recommended that President Obama deploy a strategic communication campaign and information technology to support the Green

Movement and undermine the Iranian regime.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Secretary Clinton's major speech on Internet freedom and the president's second video message to the Iranian people in 2010 both emphasized U.S. efforts to help Iranians have access to the software and Internet technology that will enable them to communicate with each other, and with the world, without fear of censorship.<sup>39</sup>

This is a trickier task than many critics acknowledge, and it is important to acknowledge the limits of strategic public engagement. The Iranian regime has become increasingly repressive in the months since the election, and offers fewer opportunities for mobilization or free expression. Online dissidents have faced growing obstacles, as the Iranian regime has been able to trace the identities of dissidents through their online activity. The role of new media in the Iranian protests has arguably been exaggerated, and pushing for Internet freedom — while desirable in its own right — may do little to actually strengthen the Green Movement in the short term.<sup>40</sup> Support for Internet freedom has emerged as an issue around which a rare bipartisan consensus can be found, but there is limited evidence that it will have great impact on Iranian politics. Though President Obama should stand publicly for the protection of human rights and political freedoms, and should strongly condemn the killing and imprisonment of peaceful protestors, it cannot base policy on the assumption that the regime will soon fall or that its communications strategy can tip the balance inside of Iran.

**Instead, the administration should continue to avoid becoming a focal point in the struggle between the regime and the opposition, while affirming its principled support for human rights and political freedoms.** No good will come of the United States staking out a political position in Iranian politics, especially when

the opposition is far from a pro-Western force. The administration should continue to support international broadcasting to provide Iranians with objective news about what is happening in Iran and how it is viewed by the world. It should support the ability of Iranians to circumvent censorship and have access to the Internet. And it should speak out against the regime's use of violence against innocent civilians and the universal human rights of citizens everywhere to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. In doing so, the administration should remember that its primary audience is the Iranian people, not the U.S. Congress. What will be popular in Washington could very well backfire in Tehran, with long-term consequences for American national interests.

Beyond Iran's borders, the administration needs a communications strategy that maintains several delicate balancing acts. It needs to keep the military option on the table in order to gain leverage over Iran, while simultaneously reassuring a nervous world that it will not embark (or allow Israel to embark) on a reckless military adventure. It needs to patiently build multilateral support for sanctions, while dealing with the conflicting interests and attitudes of many key regional and global actors. The administration should build Arab awareness of the negative implications of a nuclear Iran in order to build regional public support for steps by Arab governments to oppose Iran's nuclear program, and it should take care not to stir dangerous sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a in Arab countries. Such a balancing act would challenge any administration, particularly given the domestic turbulence and the agendas of other regional actors. But this will be a major test of the administration's ability to carry out a genuinely *strategic* public engagement campaign.

## China

*"The United States and China share mutual interests. If we advance those interests through cooperation, our people will benefit and the world will be better off — because our ability to partner with each other is a prerequisite for progress on many of the most pressing global challenges."*

— President Barack Obama, *U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue*

The administration's approach to China reflects a desire to balance competing demands in a critical bilateral relationship. On one hand, the United States needs Chinese cooperation to address a host of high-priority foreign policy challenges such as the global economic crisis, climate change, Iran and North Korea. The United States depends on Chinese financial investment, and American companies sell goods and services worth 70 billion dollars per year to the Chinese market.<sup>41</sup> As China's power in world affairs grows, there is wide recognition that the U.S.-China relationship is of vital strategic importance. At the same time, American and Chinese positions differ considerably on issues of human rights, access to the seas, Burma, Iran and climate change. Matters such as arms sales to Taiwan, Tibet, and the valuation of the Chinese currency periodically sour the relationship. The Chinese military is developing asymmetric capabilities to challenge the U.S. military's freedom of operation, and the government is pressuring American companies, such as Yahoo!, that want to operate in its markets to adopt Chinese standards of censorship. The administration appears determined to press its concerns, without triggering an unnecessary and unproductive spiral of public hostility. It also seeks to strengthen the long-term linkages that will anchor the relationship and increase mutual understanding in the coming decades.

The administration's approach has evolved significantly since January 2009. For the first year of

the administration, its public engagement strategy was to encourage cooperation and attempt to set a positive tone for relations. After failing to realize several desired changes in Chinese behavior, though, the administration adopted a more forceful approach, as articulated below. Throughout, the administration has sought to:

- Manage the economic relationship and publicly demonstrate cooperation during a time of great turmoil in global financial institutions and domestic economic crisis.
- Promote public support for cooperation with the United States on a range of global issues such as climate change and nuclear proliferation as well as relationships with North Korea and Iran.
- Show strong support for human rights and greater political pluralism without undermining an important diplomatic and economic relationship with the government.
- Build stronger and more numerous people-to-people relationships to bolster a long-term bilateral relationship of growing importance to both countries.

In the early months of the administration, pressure came in private diplomacy rather than in the public spotlight; public gestures emphasized mutual respect and avoided provocation, with the goal of making private pressure more effective. In a highly symbolic act, the president postponed a meeting with the Dalai Lama — an act the president seems unlikely to repeat. During a visit to China, the president did not engage in any high-profile meetings with dissidents. The embassy did not object to students being pre-screened for attendance at a major speech by the president and, beyond a Shanghai television station, was unable to get the event televised on major broadcast networks throughout China.<sup>42</sup> (Nonetheless, one State Department official reports that video of the town-hall event

was circulated widely within China. If accurately depicted, this experience demonstrates the potential of the Internet and social-networking technologies to amplify messages.)

Secretary Clinton similarly played down concerns over human rights in public comments surrounding her initial visit. While she noted that the United States would continue to press China on Tibet, Taiwan and human rights, she also noted that "Successive administrations and Chinese governments have been poised back and forth on these issues, and we have to continue to press them. But our pressing on those issues can't interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis." She continued, "It is essential that the United States and China have a positive, cooperative relationship."<sup>43</sup>

In terms of programs, the administration has emphasized people-to-people relationships — for instance, through a new initiative to send 100,000 U.S. students to China over the next four years, and the announcement of the upcoming Second U.S.-China Cultural Forum.<sup>44</sup> Secretary Clinton personally played a large role in fundraising for a U.S. national pavilion at the Shanghai-based world fair.<sup>45</sup> In turn, the State Department has generally welcomed Chinese public diplomacy programs in the United States, including the funding of Chinese cultural programs and language instruction. For instance, thanks to support from the Chinese government the teaching of Chinese in the United States is up more than 400 percent in the last decade, even as education in foreign languages is declining generally.<sup>46</sup>

The administration's approach to China changed as China declined to reward the administration's olive branches with cooperation on Iran or climate change. The clearest break in the pattern of public warmth and private pressure came in January 2010, when Secretary Clinton criticized Chinese policies regarding Internet freedom

pointedly and openly. Responding to tensions between Google and the Chinese government, she underscored that defending Internet freedom "needs to be part of the national brand" for America.<sup>47</sup> In so doing, she was clearly speaking to the Chinese people and a broader global audience, accepting the inevitable angering of the Chinese government. The decision to proceed with a controversial sale of advanced arms to Taiwan (already anticipated by the Chinese) further inflamed the situation, as it touched upon the most sensitive of Chinese nationalist concerns. Tensions have since abated, but the administration's firm stand on Internet freedom and Taiwan seemed to underscore that the administration sees limits to its own engagement strategy, and that it would stand up to China as necessary, even in public.

**Public engagement with China is complicated by the challenge of addressing multiple audiences.** Whereas the Obama administration (and all administrations) need to build a constructive long-term relationship with China despite many areas of difference, criticizing China is politically popular in the United States, and being "soft" on China is near political poison on both the right and the left, though for different reasons. Thus, American opinion leaders who criticize China as a currency manipulator, violator of food safety norms, unfair trader and human rights abuser will find a receptive audience — and there is at least some basis to each of these accusations. This complex reality requires the administration to walk a tightrope in public engagement with China. Watched by both Chinese and American publics, it must address areas of real conflict but in a way that does not undermine what all agree is a vital strategic relationship. And it must not let the long-term project of relationship building fall to the arrows of short-term disputes.

As the U.S.-Chinese relationship grows ever more complex, a nuanced public engagement

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*The administration's approach to China changed as China declined to reward the administration's olive branches with cooperation on Iran or climate change.*

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strategy will be required. The United States must find ways to continue to strengthen its long-term relations with the Chinese people and head off nationalistic anti-Americanism that could threaten American interests, while simultaneously standing up to an increasingly assertive Chinese government and subtly countering the ideological challenge posed by the Chinese model around the world. China's Asian neighbors question America's long-term intentions, and need reassurance about its commitment to the region in the face of growing Chinese power. As with its policy toward Iran and Pakistan, the United States must strike a balance, sufficiently standing up for American interests and values without provoking such a strong nationalistic backlash that it ultimately harms them. It must also help put U.S. policy in context and attempt to shape Chinese perceptions of American intent. For instance, while Americans view climate change policies as steps that will ultimately help both the Chinese and American people, many Chinese view such policies as an unfair effort by the United States and others to impose burdens on the Chinese people that Western countries did not face during their own period of economic development. Finally, the United States can use public engagement to explain why China should be a responsible member — and

steward — of the international system. Such activities not only contribute to public dialogue regarding how China will conduct itself as a rising power but also amplify U.S. government messages to the Chinese regime.

### **Afghanistan and Pakistan**

Since the decision in December to increase U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan and shift the emphasis of strategy in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the administration's public engagement strategy has encompassed several elements:

- Among NATO allies, build public support for, and limit public opposition to, civil and military assistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- In Afghanistan and Pakistan, counter Taliban and extremist narratives and undermine links between local narratives and the global al Qaeda narrative, while empowering Afghans and Pakistanis to counter extremist narratives.
- Reverse the trend toward greater anti-Americanism in Pakistan, while encouraging public support for counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Fight Taliban and extremist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan in ways that minimize public discontent and opposition.
- Communicate successes on the battlefield to publics, whose support will depend at least partially on whom is perceived to be winning, and prevent enemies from manipulating information and images in ways that challenge that perception.
- Enhance the legitimacy of indigenous governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan to build the capacity of those local and national governments to sustain good governance and render U.S. and NATO support unnecessary.
- Strengthen long-term relations between the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan on the one hand and Americans on the other.



The administration faces major public engagement challenges in Afghanistan, where it is fighting a war against a persistent insurgency, and Pakistan, where it is engaged in an indirect and largely covert struggle against Taliban and al Qaeda forces. In both instances, the administration's objectives depend on the support of precarious alliances with the governing regime. In both instances, popular support is one key to success, and in both countries, American military and civilian leaders have stressed that American actions communicate more loudly than any other message the United States can possibly send. Accordingly, the administration has gone to great lengths first to limit civilian casualties and second to express regret almost instantly if civilians are killed, even if all the facts are not in about the circumstances surrounding the deaths.

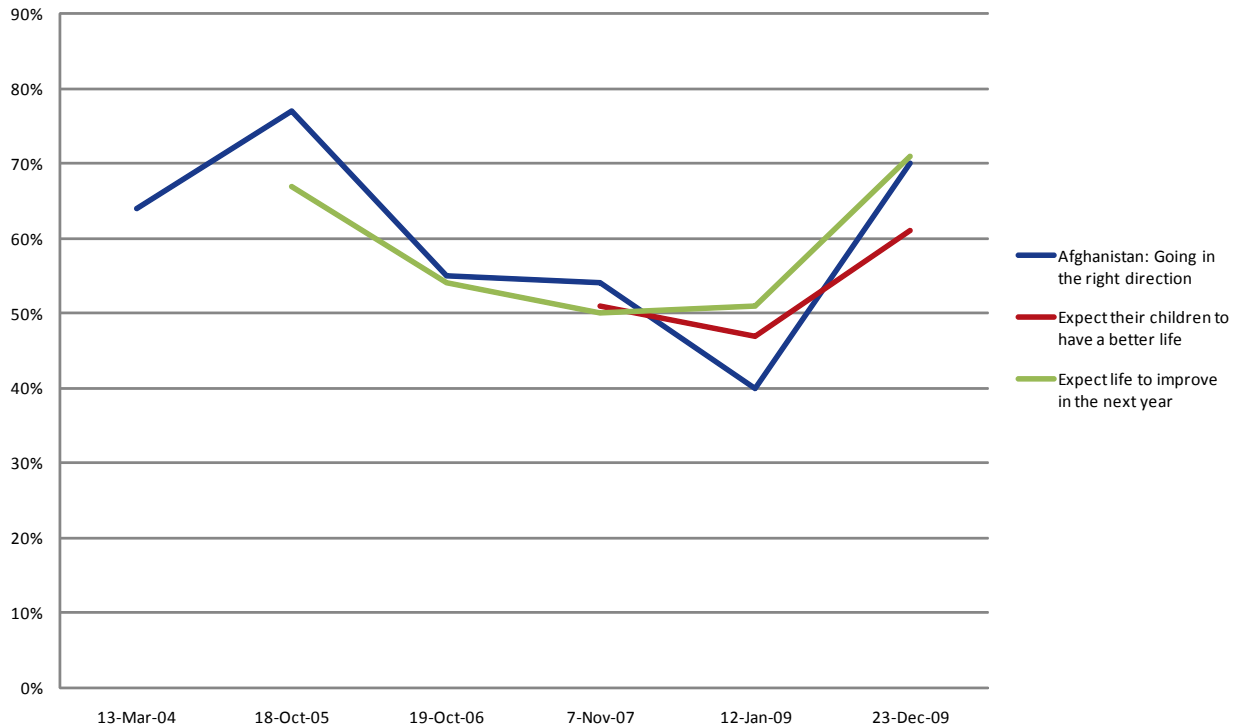
In Afghanistan, the president has endorsed a counterinsurgency strategy that puts protecting and winning the support of the population at its core. Unless the population rejects the Taliban and cooperates with efforts to fight extremists, the thinking goes, the military effort cannot succeed. Thus, an assessment conducted by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. and NATO commander, notes that the main strategic communication effort is to “maintain and strengthen the Afghan population’s positive perception of and support for” the institutions of the government of Afghanistan and the supporting role played by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the international community.<sup>48</sup> Though Afghans are increasingly optimistic about their future and show growing support for the Karzai regime, according to an ABC News/BBC poll, this situation remains extremely fragile, and the United States remains in the uncomfortable position of resting its success in the hands of an Afghan regime widely acknowledged to be extremely corrupt.<sup>49</sup>

**One area where the Obama administration can claim some success is in garnering additional support from NATO allies.** In the fall of 2009,

NATO countries contributed thousands of new troops to ISAF, in coordination with the American troop expansion — this despite the unpopularity of the war in Europe. Indeed, it is not implausible that without President Obama the NATO mission would have already been phased out rather than expanded, given the deep unpopularity of the Afghan war in most of Europe. Though it is hard to establish cause and effect, the president’s personal popularity with European peoples probably helps make this commitment more politically palatable for European decision-makers.<sup>50</sup> However, the administration’s ability to attract additional support also has its limits. In early 2010, the Dutch government fell after Prime Minister Balkende failed to persuade coalition partners in the Labor Party to sustain the country’s troop presence in Afghanistan, a highly unpopular war in the Netherlands. As a result, the Netherlands announced that it would withdraw 2,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2010.<sup>51</sup> Given the unpopularity of the war elsewhere in Europe, this could become an alarming trend.

Whereas military commanders have long embraced the need for a comprehensive communications and engagement strategy in Afghanistan, civilian agencies were slower to do so, at least publicly. The administration’s new civilian strategy in Afghanistan, released in January 2010, could prove an important step forward. For the first time, the administration presented a public engagement strategy for a conflict it has long argued is dependent upon on winning the support of the population. The strategy calls for people-to-people exchanges, media outreach, and investing in communications infrastructure that will empower Afghans to speak out against extremists.<sup>52</sup> All of these goals have been pursued energetically, attracting substantial resources and effort. These tactics are commendable, with a caveat. The administration needs to recognize that extremists will also benefit from

Figure 3: Poll of Afghans on Quality of Life in Afghanistan



Sources: ABC News, BBC and ARD Poll, "Afghanistan: Where Things Stand" (11 January 2010).

ease of communication.<sup>53</sup> It must also take more active steps to protect anti-extremist voices from intimidation and support the individuals and groups willing to speak out. Simply letting the marketplace of ideas operate is not sufficient if the Taliban kill the vendors of ideas they do not like. Security must accompany speech if anti-Taliban forces are to win the competition for hearts and minds.

However, though the administration may not recognize it as such, the most important public engagement elements of the strategy are not contained within the section on communications. First, the strategy recognizes that to be successful the United States and Afghan government must not only fight corruption, but also communicate that priority to the people of Afghanistan. With the legitimacy of the Afghan government at stake,

it is necessary, but not sufficient, to counter corruption. Success in that regard must be visible to the people. Second, the strategy also calls for putting Afghans in front, in both civilian and military roles, as much as possible. This is critical to communicating to the Afghan people that the United States and its NATO allies are not an occupying force, and that the Afghan government is capable of controlling Afghan territory and protecting the people from the Taliban.

Though the strategy contains many positive elements, it will succeed only if it is realizing tangible progress and constantly evolving. In the Taliban and its various affiliates, the United States and its partners face a highly adept and agile adversary, and therefore must stay one step ahead when possible and be prepared to adapt their own plans as necessary.<sup>54</sup> In Pakistan, the

Figure 4: Performance Ratings in Afghanistan, 2005 to Present



Sources: ABC News, BBC and ARD Poll, "Afghanistan: Where Things Stand" (11 January 2010).

administration faces a population that has more sympathy for extremists, though the violence of extremist groups, especially in the Swat Valley, did much to undercut that support. As a result, popular opinion is turning against the Pakistani Taliban, according to poll data.<sup>55</sup> However, that popular turn against extremists has not translated into support for cooperating with the United States, which remains widely distrusted. Drone strikes, while effective in neutralizing terrorist groups and condoned by citizens in certain areas, are disliked by the broad Pakistani public. Anti-Americanism is strong and, according to some reports, intensifying.

The State Department reportedly has developed a detailed public engagement campaign that seeks to counter extremism and anti-Americanism. However, the Pakistani reception of major new

funds demonstrates the depth of the challenge and the limits of public engagement. The Kerry-Lugar bill provides 7.5 billion dollars in new foreign assistance but was met not with thanks but with public anger due to perceptions that conditions imposed by the Congress were too intrusive.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the struggle for public support in Pakistan has registered some gains but is far from over and hardly a success.

The case of Pakistan demonstrates clearly the limits of public engagement as an instrument of statecraft. Even large amounts of exchanges, broadcasts, speeches or development activities will not move public opinion instantly. Moreover, people form their opinions based at least in part on reactions to American actions and policies and, right now, the Pakistani people generally object to American drone strikes and fear American

intentions. This underlying mistrust could change over time, especially if the United States keeps its commitments and Pakistanis feel that their lives are improving. However, that change is likely to be long and slow, if it happens at all. The role for public engagement is therefore to accentuate areas where this is happening, build strong relationships with opinion leaders, and contribute to a foundation of trust in which American actions might be interpreted less negatively and its intentions might be less suspect.

It is worth noting the administration's efforts to roll out a new strategy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, which illustrate the challenges of balancing domestic and international public engagement. The roll-out was carefully orchestrated, but it followed a long period of enforced silence combined with prodigious leaking, which undermined the administration's efforts to influence perceptions. The relative silence across the government in the months of the review forced a passivity upon government efforts and led both the American public and key foreign actors to desperately scrutinize leaks. With the strategy being refined almost until the day of delivery, there was little opportunity to prepare a communications strategy aimed at foreign audiences to mobilize support. On the day of the unveiling, the single most crucial point that needed to be clearly communicated — the logic of the timeline — became hopelessly muddled as different senior officials offered varying interpretations and explanations. Much of the effort was, understandably, oriented at persuading the American people, that people abroad were neglected in this crucial unveiling phase. Over time, American strategic engagement picked up — with Secretary Clinton's video messages to the Afghan and Pakistani people and other subsequent administration efforts to engage them through social media — but the initial muddle created problems that were difficult to correct.<sup>57</sup>

### Lessons for the Obama Administration

Though it is too soon to judge definitely the administration's performance in these policy areas, it is nonetheless possible to draw several important lessons, which may be useful in the Obama administration's second half.

#### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

It remains absolutely vital to understand the perceptions and priorities of the audience in question.<sup>58</sup> We Americans cannot remind ourselves often enough that others do not see the world as we do, and that our actions and words are not always judged fairly or with the benefit of the doubt. As a people convinced of their nation's desire to do good in the world, Americans must remember that, while many foreigners do indeed view America as a "shining city on a hill," many others fear U.S. power, distrust U.S. motives and interpret U.S. policies as an attempt to subvert their own society even when that is far from the truth. Whether the Obama administration attempts to engage the people of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan or the Middle East, it should be wary of assuming a shared sense of interests or of provoking a nationalistic backlash that undermines American and even mutual objectives. Developing and integrating this level of nuanced understanding is currently a weakness in the U.S. government's public engagement strategies. Much as leaders in the U.S. military intelligence community are grappling with the need to collect better information and use it to inform actions, civilian leaders need to develop a more nuanced understanding of public opinion in their areas of operation and more effectively integrate that into policy and its implementation.<sup>59</sup>

#### INTEGRATE POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The administration has an inconsistent record of integrating communication and public engagement planning into its foreign policy and national security planning. It is impossible to have a

coherent communications strategy without a clear policy. With the release of a new National Security Strategy, the administration should take the opportunity to ensure there is a public engagement strategy to support every major policy initiative, from countering terrorism and climate change to advocating for greater international trade. Success in these areas requires political decisions on the part of foreign governments, all of which are at least sensitive to political opinion.

#### BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER POLICY ROLL-OUTS

The administration has proven masterful at policy roll-outs and major speeches, which have been accompanied by a well-coordinated communications blitz across multiple levels. The administration has been less adept at preparation and follow-up. Strategic public engagement should be done in a much more *anticipatory* way, shaping the information environment well in advance of likely policy initiatives rather than waiting until the crisis hits. For example, the lengthy Af-Pak policy debate occurred in something of a communications vacuum, while the push for an Israeli settlement freeze was not preceded by any effort to build Israeli public support for the move. The December 2009 Copenhagen speech on climate change was wasted because no political agreement was in sight. Even the paradigmatic Cairo speech was written without a ready plan to follow it. For all the brilliance of the policy roll-outs, the administration needs more preparation and more follow-through to fully benefit from presidential public interventions.

#### ADAPTATION

Especially for an administration that came to power through an agile, clever and widely admired political campaign, the Obama administration has been slow to recognize where it is going astray and to make necessary tactical adjustment. At times, it has allowed itself to get caught up in responding to the crisis of the day

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*Strategic public engagement should be done in a much more anticipatory way, shaping the information environment well in advance of likely policy initiatives rather than waiting until the crisis hits.*

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and forgotten to play the long game as well. The administration urgently needs to regain momentum, reclaim command of the global narrative and do a better job of backing up its words with visible actions. It needs to match its long-term relationship building and governmental transformation with a coordinated, consistent strategic campaign to bind its actions into a coherent narrative. There should always be a Plan B.

We turn now to the institutions behind public engagement, a key ingredient for executing successful public engagement strategies.

#### IV. INSTITUTIONALIZING A "WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT" ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

More than 30 reports on public diplomacy over the last decade have observed that the American government is poorly organized and inadequately staffed and funded to execute a comprehensive public engagement strategy.<sup>60</sup> Though the previous administration reversed a precipitous decline in public diplomacy spending and began to rebuild America's public diplomacy and strategic communications institutions, this effort remains incomplete.<sup>61</sup> The Obama administration has sought to continue this effort, albeit with many points of departure, by elevating the importance of public engagement, enhancing coordination across government agencies, investing in public engagement capacities and "rebalancing" the prominence of the Defense and State Departments in this area. While there has been real progress in some areas, there remains a long way to go.

To build the organizational infrastructure for public engagement, the Obama administration has taken several steps. The NSC created a Global Engagement Directorate, and made a Deputy National Security Adviser close to the president responsible for the strategic communication and global engagement portfolio. An active interagency process has been designed, with the National Security Council in the lead. A strategic communication representative now sits in all relevant policy meetings at the NSC, in principle giving the administration the ability to incorporate foreign public opinion and engagement considerations into all levels of the policy process. The Pentagon and the State Department have been working together to integrate engagement activities with all aspects of foreign and security policy and, according to numerous accounts, work bilaterally to coordinate activities in numerous areas related to public engagement.

These internal reforms absorbed significant attention in the administration's first year, and much needs to be done to translate these internal reforms into effective policy. The administration has not released a unified strategy for global public engagement, and it is not clear that one is forthcoming. However, some building blocks of a strategy exist or are under development. In response to Defense Authorization Act requirements, the NSC and Defense Department have prepared "1055 Reports" to the U.S. Congress detailing the administration's philosophy, organization, and plans for strategic engagement. The Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has engaged in an extensive exercise to develop a new strategic framework that matches goals and resources. NSC staff members have crafted carefully the roll-out of big policy initiatives and committed to building relationships over the longer term, especially with young people in predominantly Muslim societies. Controversial information programs at the Pentagon have been reined in, and the DOD is reviewing its information operations programs after a recent scandal involving contractors engaged in covert activities.

Actually delivering on the administration's promises and intentions in the face of entrenched bureaucracies and turf battles will require a concerted effort to address organizational challenges in key government agencies and the sometimes complicated relationships between them. **Questions remain about who ultimately is in charge, how strategic public engagement fits within the policy-making process, and implementation.** The new structures put into place need to work more effectively, interagency cooperation needs to be improved, leadership authorities need to be defined and resources matched to those responsibilities. And ultimately, internal reforms do not matter at all to external audiences who care mainly about deeds and delivering on promises.

## THE POWER OF NETWORK DIPLOMACY: ENGAGING BUSINESSES, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

Despite the enormous power and resources of the U.S. government, its reach is dwarfed by the private activities of American and foreign businesses, non-profit organizations, universities, professional societies, religious organizations, diaspora groups, entertainment and cultural organizations, and countless other international connections that transpire every day.

The Obama Administration appears to recognize the power of the private sector and has expanded substantially its engagement of private groups both in the United States and overseas. Building on the efforts of the Bush Administration, it has elevated the head of a State Department office on public-private partnerships to the rank of ambassador and made the empowerment of indigenous communication efforts a core part of its Afghanistan public engagement strategy.

Nonetheless, as argued in a recent CNAS policy brief,<sup>1</sup> the U.S. government could do far more to invest in private sector efforts that are ultimately reach more audiences and, at least for some, carry greater credibility than official U.S. government activities. Private groups also have the benefit of being able to tread where officially sanctioned efforts cannot (such as U.S.-Iranian scientific exchanges which were supported by but not officially tied to the U.S. State Department). To make the most of what State Department Policy Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter calls "network diplomacy," we echo the calls of reports published by the Defense Science Board, Council on Foreign Relations, Center for the Study of the President and Congress, Brookings Institution, CSIS and many others to create an independent non-profit organization to support and amplify the public engagement efforts of the U.S. government.

1. See Kristin M. Lord, *Empowering the Private Sector for the Public Good: the Power of Network Diplomacy* (Washington DC: CNAS, January 2010).

## The President and Cabinet

A distinguishing factor of this administration's public engagement strategy is the president himself. Though American presidents are always the most important and visible spokesmen for the country, President Obama has taken this importance to a new level because of the intense global interest in his personal story, the fact that the United States elected a black president only a few decades after the civil rights movement, and his exceptional rhetorical skills.

The importance of President Obama's personal public diplomacy should be neither understated nor exaggerated. A revisionist backlash has set in of late, diminishing the significance of the president's personal appeal and his highly-publicized speeches abroad. In fact, few in the administration would confuse his personal popularity with policy success. Nonetheless, the transition from Bush to Obama gave people around the world the opportunity to set aside entrenched outrage and hostility and see a new beginning, an opportunity the Obama administration has seized.

The power of the president's oratory and his own highly effective public diplomacy are a powerful diplomatic asset that should be carefully deployed. But the power of the president's inspirational words should not outpace his ability to deliver. Presidential public diplomacy must be part of a concerted, full-spectrum engagement strategy in coordination with both the communications efforts and the policy instruments of the relevant agencies and bureaus. It should be treated as a precious asset, to be used only at the appropriate time and for maximum effect.

The burden here can be — and is being — carried by other senior officials besides the President. Secretary Clinton has made a particularly noteworthy effort to engage with people on her foreign trips, and made herself available for a wide range of interviews, town-halls, and other

exchanges facilitated by social media. Secretary Gates and senior military officials have also contributed at appropriate moments, as has Vice President Joseph Biden.

**However, the administration must do much more to build the institutional capacity of the rest of the administration to carry out strategic public engagement.** President Obama is a powerful asset but he is not enough. Mustering a well-received presidential speech should only be one part of an integrated campaign, with careful advance work and substantive follow-up ready to go immediately after delivery.

### **The National Security Council and the Inter-agency Process**

In the Obama administration, the NSC officially leads the coordination of strategic public engagement across the U.S. government. This approach is logical and well-conceived in principle but, in practice, shows room for improvement.

The Obama administration has made serious efforts to put meat upon the bones of an NSC-led inter-agency process. The overall structure that has taken shape makes sense, and key roles have been filled. A Deputy National Security Adviser is responsible for overseeing all aspects of strategic public engagement. This position has been held by two individuals – first Denis McDonough and then Benjamin Rhodes – who are personally close to the president and enjoy the informal but significant legitimacy that conveys. The Deputy National Security Adviser (DNSA) sits in all relevant policy meetings, and chairs the relevant inter-agency committee meetings. The deputy oversees a senior director for global engagement, who sits alongside a related counter-terrorism directorship. Unfortunately, reports indicate that those two elements of the NSC rarely interact and are not well coordinated to date, primarily due to the concern (noted above) to leave the counter-

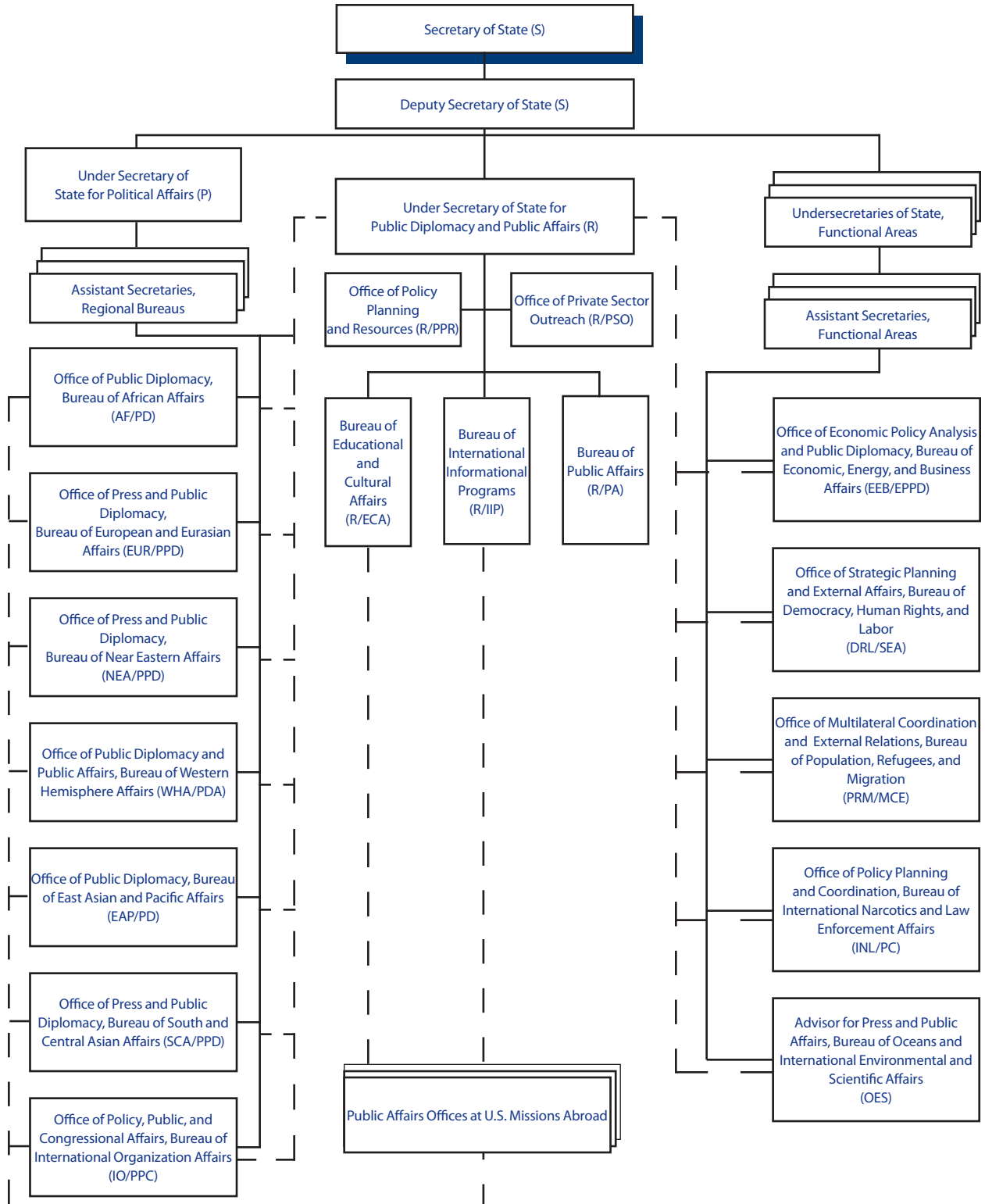
terrorism framework out of the broader efforts to reach out to Muslims.

The leading role played by the NSC responds to a widespread concern about the dominance of the Defense Department in the Bush administration. It is appropriate in principle, given that many issues require the participation of a wide range of government agencies, even beyond State and Defense. Countering violent extremism, for instance, must draw upon and coordinate not only State and DOD but also the National Counter-Terrorism Center, the Department of Homeland Security, Treasury, the FBI, the CIA, and more. Programs to reach out to Muslims are coordinated by the Directorate of Global Engagement and draw on expertise across the government, as far afield from the centers of traditional diplomacy as the Small Business Association, NASA, and the Department of Education. Only the NSC can effectively balance and coordinate a “whole of government” approach to such issues, especially when the State Department lacks a strong central voice.

The NSC uses weekly Interagency Policy Coordination (IPC) meetings to coordinate across the government and integrate strategic engagement concerns into the policy process. These meetings, chaired by the appropriate NSC lead, are intended to routinize cooperation and coordination across the government. The discipline imposed by these meetings has been reinforced by NSC pressure on each agency to reorganize its own process, to designate one person to attend meetings and to rationalize the policy process and to streamline internal coordination. The regular contact is intended to build personal relationships, at least partially overcoming traditional suspicions and resentments, and making it possible to communicate clearly and quickly across the buildings. Officials in different agencies report that they now know whom to call in other agencies, and are better informed about parallel efforts being undertaken by others in the government. One veteran



Figure 5: Organization of Public Diplomacy Within the Department of State



public diplomacy officer underscored that this is a new and real achievement.

In addition to coordinating government-wide public engagement activities, the NSC has two major additional responsibilities. First, DNSA Ben Rhodes continues to write major presidential speeches like the eloquent Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Second, the NSC is taking on major operational responsibilities and leading specific initiatives such as the follow-up to the president's Cairo speech. Many foreign policy veterans are intensely wary of the NSC playing such an operational role. They point to the limited capacity of the NSC to execute operational tasks and the opportunity cost of it doing so instead of coordinating much larger agencies. The NSC does not have the resources to be truly operational and is not in a position to implement sustained institutional programs, given the fact that members of its staff change frequently and are often political appointees. Long-term engagement on issues like those laid out in the Cairo speech belong more properly in other parts of the U.S. government, like as the State Department's Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

It is too soon to judge the efficacy of the new interagency process or the range of activities in the NSC's portfolio. In some ways, the initial assessment is good. Strategic public engagement is taken seriously in policy-making, there is a regular effort at coordination (something lacking in earlier administrations), and there appears to be routine informal contact across the interagency and with the NSC. **However, there are also concerns that the NSC is under-staffed and under-resourced to play both a coordinating and operational role and also write presidential speeches. It is not clear that the NSC has the bandwidth, the staff or the budget to handle all of these responsibilities well.** Other agencies grumble that they need both clearer operational guidance and less micro-level interference.

### The State Department

Taken as a whole, the State Department appears to be lagging behind other agencies, at least so far, despite Secretary Clinton's eager embrace of her role in engaging with foreign publics. Key positions remain unfilled (specifically the Assistant Secretary for Education and Cultural Affairs and the assistant secretary level Coordinator for International Information Programs), and efforts are spread widely across the department. Resources are inadequate and, by the standards of the DOD, minuscule. Moreover, our interviews produced numerous concerns about the State Department's lack of leadership, vision, or capacity. We are not in a position to assess whether these concerns are justified, but the perception alone should be cause for concern.

Despite these challenges, there do appear to be significant efforts at institutional reform underway. Judith McHale, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and the former CEO of Discovery, has dug into the difficult job of reforming an antiquated and ineffective bureaucracy. She is currently engaged in a major strategic planning exercise, one that attempts to match resources and mission in ways often lacking in the past. According to reports, she is also engaging both ambassadors and the assistant secretaries of the State Department's regional bureaus energetically. In recent Senate testimony, McHale proposed establishing Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) positions for public diplomacy in each of the regional bureaus to both elevate the role of public diplomacy and integrate public diplomacy and foreign policy making, an idea first proposed by predecessor Karen Hughes (currently, only the Near Eastern Affairs bureau has a DAS with public diplomacy responsibilities as part of her portfolio).<sup>62</sup> McHale is also creating a DAS for International Media Outreach who would report to the

Table 1: FY 2008-FY2011 Public Diplomacy Appropriations in U.S. Department of State

APPROPRIATIONS FOR STATE DEPARTMENT PUBLIC DIPLOMACY (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)				
	FY 2008 Actual	FY 2009 Actual	FY 2010 Enacted	FY 2011 Request
Regional Bureaus	280.61	300.49	339.73	381.11
Bureau of International Information Programs	51.55	65.72	80.83	97.12
Functional Bureaus	26.20	26.36	29.44	65.50
Central Program Increases	n/a	19.69*	64.41	18.06
Educational and Cultural Exchanges	501.35	538.0	635.0	633.2
National Endowment for Democracy	0	115.0	118.0	105.0
East-West Center	19.34	21.0	23.0	11.4
Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship Program	n/a	.500	.500	.500
Israeli Arab Scholarship Program	.232	.177	.375	.375
Other	11.61	17.14	18.43	18.73
<b>PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OVERALL TOTAL (INCLUDES DIPLOMATIC AND CONSULAR PROGRAMS):</b>	<b>890.9</b>	<b>1,084.39</b>	<b>1,309.72</b>	<b>1,331.00</b>

\* FY 2009 Estimate

Source: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2010, p. 13. See also, U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2011, p. 15

assistant secretary for public affairs and oversee outreach to foreign media, a vital constituency that merits more attention. McHale also seeks to expand the Office of Policy, Planning and Resources in order to exert stronger control over budgets and personnel in her line. She has made a significant effort to engage public diplomacy officers in the field, soliciting their input into the new strategy and bringing them together.

**There is a new emphasis on using public engagement to support foreign policy objectives, a trend likely to encounter resistance from some long-serving public diplomacy officers who see an inherent long-term value in engagement and education and are wary of seeing it linked too directly with the achievement of specific foreign policy goals.** The Department is using social-networking technologies to support a

wide range of goals, including efforts to counter transnational crime. The State Department's Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism is reportedly building the Department's capacity for countering violent extremist narratives. The Department and its embassies overseas have conducted extensive outreach activities around foreign visits by the secretary and president. Finally, the State Department has developed a detailed strategic public engagement plan to support U.S. foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But despite these efforts, State's public diplomacy apparatus appears to remain a relatively weak player in the administration's broader efforts. Part of the challenge lies in the relationship between the office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and the rest of the State Department. Internal efforts are spread widely across the Department. Judith McHale is Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, but does not have the authority to impose unity of effort across the Department (let alone across the inter-agency). Three assistant secretary-level positions nominally report to her, but two remain unfilled and one, the assistant secretary for public affairs, has traditionally had only a loose relationship with the Under Secretary, though there are signs that Under Secretary McHale would like to change that. A permanent new Coordinator for International Information Programs has yet to be nominated, and the Assistant Secretary for Education and Cultural Affairs, Ann Stock, was nominated only in December and is not yet confirmed. High-level officials with overlapping portfolios report directly to the Secretary and not to McHale; they include: the Special Representative to Muslim Communities; a Senior Advisor for Innovation responsible for helping the Department maximize the use of the Internet, social networking, and other communications technologies; the Special Representative for Global Partnerships, a position newly elevated

to the rank of Ambassador; and an Ambassador-At-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism, responsible for countering violent extremism. Finally, Richard Holbrooke, Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, has his own strategic communication staff. If the State Department wants a strong, coordinated public diplomacy effort and a powerful role in the interagency process, Secretary Clinton should consider integrating some of these efforts at a level below the Secretary of State, for whom all of the above-mentioned individuals is a direct report. Compounding the problem of dispersed authority, the public affairs officers who staff the regional bureaus and America's embassies overseas are both over-worked and do not report to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.<sup>63</sup> They report to their respective ambassadors who, in turn, engage most directly with the assistant secretaries of regional bureaus and the Secretary of State herself.

Though the Obama administration is trying to rebalance the roles of the Pentagon and State Department and coordinate them through an NSC-led process, the vast imbalance of resources between the Pentagon and the State Department and the absence of a parallel organizational structure continue to plague efforts at effective inter-agency coordination. The Pentagon frequently complains that it would happily give money and authority to the State Department if there was anyone on the other side to take it. The State Department has no counterpart to the Global Strategic Engagement Coordinating Committee (described below) being set up in the Defense Department, and the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs lacks a comparable set of authorities, resources, or access to the policy process.

**More resources are required, but the odds of acquiring major new resources for public diplomacy are slim in the current budget climate.**

Complicating matters, Hill leaders reportedly doubt the State Department's ability to use additional resources well. It is true that resources for public diplomacy are increasing, but they rise from a low base. More worrisome still is the fact that mandates exceed resources, creating the potential for dashed expectations overseas and a continuing spiral of distrust within the United States Congress. Regarding the latter, State does not have nearly the resources it needs to do its job well, and so it underperforms. That underperformance further reduces confidence in the State Department and leads to questions about whether new resources could be spent well. A successful Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), the department-wide strategic planning review launched by Secretary Clinton, could begin to reverse this cycle. Indeed, Hillary Clinton's greatest legacy could be re-establishing confidence in the State Department and persuading the Congress to fill its coffers appropriately.

The QDDR offers an opportunity to think about structural reforms that could rectify this imbalance, though similar efforts in the past have gathered dust. This may involve more than simply shifting resources to State or an improved interagency process. Some argue that it should involve radically breaking down the walls between regional bureaus.<sup>64</sup> Many public diplomacy veterans continue to agitate for a reconstitution of the United States Information Agency, which was dissolved into the State Department in 1999.<sup>65</sup> In general, such proposals for radical organizational change strike us as unnecessary — particularly since they would consume years of effort and internal bureaucratic warfare that the country can ill afford, and we believe that better alternatives exist.<sup>66</sup> However, the State Department's public engagement efforts need fundamental reform in order to make them more strategic, more coordinated, better resourced, and ultimately more effective.

## The Defense Department

Efforts to restructure the approach to strategic public engagement appear most advanced in the Pentagon, where efforts are coordinated by the Global Strategic Engagement Strategy Coordination Committee (GSECC), which is co-chaired by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (OASD-PA). The GSECC provides guidance and resolves conflicts related to strategic communication, and prepares mandated documents like the "1055 report" to Congress.<sup>67</sup> It has also been working to improve oversight of information operations. Finally, it serves as the primary point of contact on strategic engagement and strategic communication issues, both within the Pentagon and across the relevant agencies.

In addition to creating the GSECC, the Pentagon has engaged in significant efforts to reorganize and coordinate its strategic public engagement efforts. Within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Under Secretary has established a Global Strategic Engagement Team (GSET) that facilitates strategic communications coordination within OUSD-P and works with other Pentagon offices and agencies, such as the public affairs and information operations functions of the Combatant Commands. In addition, the GSET has begun establishing templates for rapid policy roll-outs and streamlining the integration of policy and strategic engagement. The controversial office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Support for Public Diplomacy, established during the Bush administration, was closed early in the Obama administration and its core functions relocated to the GSET. Other activities were shifted to the regional and functional offices, with guidance and support from the GSET and OSD-PA. Finally, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans is working to integrate strategic public engagement into longer-term strategy documents.

There are signs that these changes are not just in wiring diagrams but also translating into changes in styles and substance. The Department's most senior military and civilian leaders, most prominently Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have advocated a greater sensitivity to public opinion overseas and the messages conveyed by American actions, not just words. They, particularly Chairman Mullen, have also called for a move away from one-way strategies focused on "messaging" in favor of strategies focused more on dialogue.<sup>68</sup> For instance, in the fall of 2008 Defense Secretary Gates announced a new policy of expressing regret for Afghan civilian casualties even before the facts were known on the premise that demonstrating such sensitivity would pay off in stronger relationships with local communities. In July 2009, General McChrystal issued a tactical directive ordering leaders at all levels to pay careful attention to civilian casualties and local sensitivities. In response to this reorientation, the GSET reportedly is developing improved capacities to evaluate how people in other countries perceive American words and deeds, the flows of communications in specific societies and the impact of particular communications campaigns.

It will take time to determine whether these changes at the top translate into practice on the ground and whether attempts to reform, consolidate, and reorient the Pentagon's strategic communication behemoth will hold over time. The absence of a replacement for the "Global War on Terror" framework is felt keenly in the Pentagon. Since the Pentagon's vast programming currently rests on legal authorities embedded within that overarching framework and generally requires lengthy lead times for development and planning, it is struggling to calibrate its strategic communications in a post-Global War on Terror era without a clear alternative framework.

Further challenges remain. The overall relationship between the Pentagon's strategic communication mission and the dizzying array of information operations, psychological operations, and covert programs remains contentious, and coordination across the Pentagon — to say nothing of coordination between the Pentagon and other agencies — is famously difficult. Combatant commands retain significant operational autonomy within theater and have vast human resources and money allocated to public engagement.

An outstanding question is the proper role of DOD in strategic public engagement relative to other U.S. government agencies. The Pentagon remains heavily invested in strategic communication, especially in the "hot zones" of current wars where DOD overshadows other agencies (to the frustration of the military, which wants more support in precisely those areas). For the most part, the role for DOD strategic communications in such combat zones is appropriate, though still in need of oversight and coordination with civilian agencies. In areas like Yemen or the Horn of Africa, where weak states and the presence of al Qaeda-affiliated movements pose real security challenges, military strategic public engagement also seems appropriate but carries risks that need to be managed. **DOD has a huge footprint overseas, and its bases have a major impact on local communities and affect those communities' views of the United States more broadly. Managing those relationships successfully is vital to the health of American alliances.** And combatant commands like SOUTHCOM have embraced nontraditional missions like disaster assistance that entail substantial interaction with foreign populations but require different public engagement strategies than those necessary in a war like those in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Indeed, there are clear areas where DOD should be an active participant in public engagement, and

there is growing consensus about areas where it should not. Between these two categories, however, is a large grey zone. In those circumstances, the appropriate role of DOD and the armed services relative to civilian agencies still merits review.

### **Broadcasting Board of Governors**

U.S. government funded broadcasting is a major, but often overlooked, element of America's strategic public engagement. The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is the organization responsible for overseeing all civilian international broadcasting sponsored by the U.S. government, including the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio and TV Marti, and the Middle East Broadcasting Network, which includes the Alhurra television station and Radio Sawa. The BBG and its constituent entities employ 3,791 people around the world and have a budget of over 750 million dollars, which is roughly equivalent to the State Department's public diplomacy budget and a sizable percentage of the State Department's total budget of 16 billion dollars. BBG's constituent services broadcast in 60 languages to a reported 171 million people weekly via the Internet; satellite, terrestrial and cable television; and shortwave, AM and FM radio.<sup>69</sup>

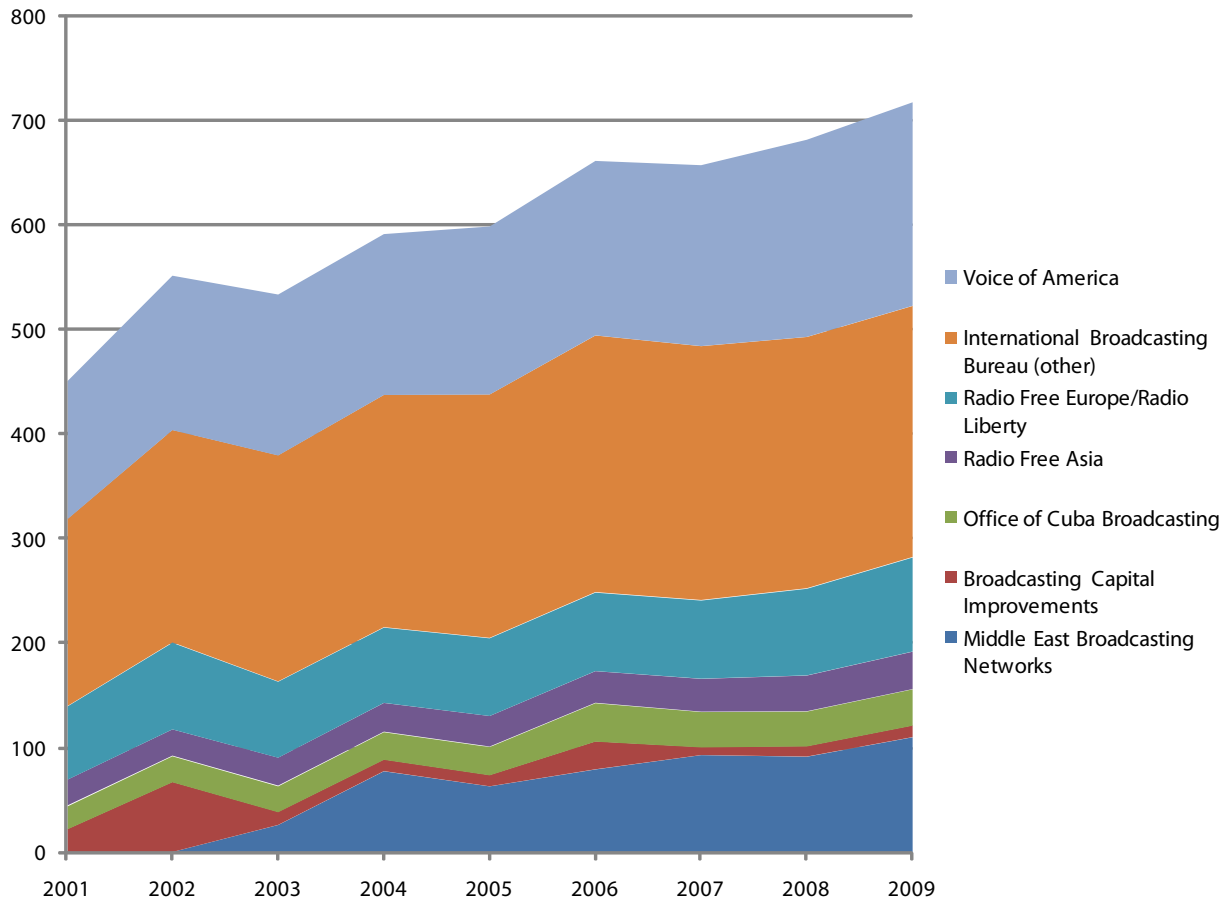
American foreign broadcasting has a long and proud history of fulfilling its mandate to broadcast credible news journalism rather than acting as an overt instrument of American propaganda. Its veterans tend to bristle at the notion that they should serve a "public diplomacy" role, since in their view this would only discredit their news services and harm their credibility. Yet such broadcasting is one of the key means by which the United States reaches out to mass publics around the world. By broadcasting news and other programming, the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty radio broadcasting played a significant role in undermining the authority and legitimacy of the Soviet Union

and Eastern European Communist regimes. Today, through outlets like Persian-language Radio Farda and Radio Free Asia (which broadcasts to nine countries in Asia), the United States continues to provide news and other informative programming to closed societies like North Korea and Burma, penetrate censorship in countries like Iran and China, or reach societies, like Somalia or rural Afghanistan, where access to information is limited. In the wake of natural disasters, broadcasts to Haiti, Burma, and Indonesia played critical roles in providing public information.

Since 2001, Congress has flushed the BBG with funds and, as a result, the BBG has expanded its weekly audience from 100 million in 2002 to 175 million in 2008.<sup>70</sup> It also took on new missions, such as countering global extremism, and expanded its use of new technologies such as text-messaging and social-networking platforms.

Despite these successes, America's foreign broadcasting has drawn extensive criticism over the last decade, and the Obama administration has only begun to address the role of broadcasting. A major obstacle is the fact that the BBG still has numerous vacant seats on its board, including the chairmanship. For years, partisan bickering stood in the way of the appointment of new members, and now, mid-way through President Obama's first year, every member's term has expired. The board currently has only four full-time governors plus ex officio members like the Secretary of State (who is typically represented by Judith McHale, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs). In November 2009, President Obama nominated a full slate of appointees to the BBG, including Walter Isaacson, who would serve as BBG chairman. A total of eight nominees currently await confirmation. Yet this confirmation could take time. Senators with reservations about the BBG are either reluctant to confirm the nominees or

Figure 6: BBG Funding From 2001 to 2008 (in millions of dollars)



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors, "Budget Submissions FY 2001-2010" (no date): 7.

seek to use the confirmation process as leverage to schedule hearings.<sup>71</sup>

The BBG faces further organizational challenges. The organization is a jumble of separate but overlapping broadcasting organizations, each with its own administrative structure. This structure is Congressionally mandated and would require legislation to resolve. The chairmanship of the BBG remains a part-time position, despite the BBG's large size and 750 million dollars annual budget. Morale at the BBG is devastatingly low. A survey conducted

by the Office of Personnel Management queried staff in 37 government agencies and found the BBG in last place for morale and next-to-last in job satisfaction.<sup>72</sup>

The fragmented nature of the BBG contributes to a haphazard, and sometimes incoherent, mix of broadcasting projects. For instance, both RFE/RL's Radio Farda and VOA Persian radio service broadcast in Persian into Iran. Congressional politics lead to distorted priorities, such as the long-running saga of TV Marti, an anti-Castro television station which can not actually be



viewed in Cuba due to government jamming but is kept in place largely due to domestic lobbying. BBG officials ask to be judged on the impact of their broadcasts, not their organizational chart. But it is hard to escape the fact that a more efficient organization would free up resources that could be devoted to programming.

**Though the BBG's component broadcasting services operate globally and there are many differences between them, the elephant in the international broadcasting room is the troubled Arabic-language TV station Alhurra.** Created in February 2004, Alhurra has struggled to attract Arab audiences or to have a substantial impact upon Arab public opinion or public discourse. Alhurra is extremely expensive, with total expenditures in the hundreds of millions of dollars by some estimates (the FY 2010 budget for the Middle East Broadcasting Networks is 112.6 million dollars).<sup>73</sup> Many experts had hoped that the new administration would bring fresh eyes to Alhurra and the broadcasting operations generally, but this thus far does not appear to have happened. A 2008 Congressionally mandated review carried out by the University of Southern California found sweeping problems with its programming, while a 2009 report by the State Department Inspector General presented a damning indictment of its management practices.<sup>74</sup> In response to this more effective oversight, Alhurra has improved markedly, with enhanced programming (the al-Youm program, partly produced in the region, is the most publicized example) and more professional management. Some of its content is now offered on its Web site, and it has made great efforts to publicize a new three-hour talk show as a cornerstone of its programming. A new Inspector General's report in March 2010 confirmed these positive trends, but noted that fundamental questions remain.<sup>75</sup>

In accordance with its strategic plan, the BBG continues to seek closer cooperation with U.S.

government agencies engaged in public diplomacy even as it maintains the traditional "firewall" between its journalistic content and the aims of the U.S. government (a source of intermittent tension since the origins of U.S.-government funded broadcasting). This cooperation appears to be deepening, especially in two areas. First, the BBG is working more directly with counterparts in the State Department, National Security Council, USAID and the DOD to align its broadcasting strategy with U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy objectives. For instance, officials report that the BBG is conducting targeted audience research in Indonesia in preparation for the president's trip, and they have redoubled efforts to provide programming on energy and environmental issues to non-U.S. government broadcasters in Latin America in response to State Department requests. Second, the BBG is developing a reputation as a "go-to" source of desperately needed research and analysis regarding foreign public opinion, a claim made by the BBG and confirmed by the State Department. This research serves BBG needs but also responds to priorities of the national security establishment. As such, audience research regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran is a current focus.

**As the Obama administration continues its efforts to strengthen U.S. strategic public engagement, we recommend a major new focus on international broadcasting strategy in general and the BBG in particular. Specifically, as a first step we recommend a major review of U.S. broadcasting strategy by an impartial party.** (The BBG should not be placed in the position of reviewing itself; reviewers should be prepared to serve as objective critics, without appearing to run afoul of Congressional mandates.) This review should examine the overall strategy of the BBG and how it aligns with both long- and short-term U.S. national security objectives, how U.S. broadcasting should adapt to an

## THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The enthusiastic embrace of new media has been a signature component of the Obama administration's global public engagement strategy. Building on the efforts of the previous administration, the State Department maintains an office of eDiplomacy (created in 2003), has expanded blogging, posts content on YouTube, and even employs a Twitter feed to display news alerts and engage with readers and journalists.<sup>1</sup> The administration created a new senior advisor for innovation, who reports directly to the Secretary of State and is aggressively pushing America even further into the world of social networking. The Pentagon, for its part, recently appointed Sumit Agarwal to be the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Social Media. In this role, Agarwal will spearhead "efforts to use new social media to listen to and converse with citizens of the world."<sup>2</sup>

Far greater efforts are now made to translate important documents into dozens of languages and disseminate them with talking points widely to relevant embassies worldwide.<sup>3</sup> In Afghanistan, the embassy team acted quickly upon analysis demonstrating the importance of SMS relative to printed materials or the Internet. During the Cairo speech President Obama's remarks were simultaneously broadcast internationally via SMS in English, Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Individuals who signed up for the

service could also reply to the messages and have their remarks later posted on America.gov.<sup>4</sup>

This effort is not entirely new. James Glassman, who served as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy in the last year of the Bush administration, actively advocated the use of new media for what he called Public Diplomacy 2.0. Some of the programs he promoted include the Web site America.gov, blogger roundtables, the Democracy Video Challenge, and a Digital Outreach Team.<sup>5</sup>

The administration's commitment to a free media, outlined in Secretary Clinton's January 2010 speech, is to be commended, as are the administration's aggressive efforts to develop a social media outreach strategy. However, with so much emphasis and hype surrounding social media, there is a risk of utilizing these forms of media as an end unto themselves. It is important to ask careful questions about the purpose of such engagement: to what end are SMS messages being sent, or Twitter updates Tweeted? Is the point to inform and engage, and is this being accomplished? Is social media the right way to reach the intended audience?

Social networking technologies are a powerful tool but, as always, public engagement activities should be driven by strategy; they are not a substitute for one.

1. Mark Landler and Brian Stelter, "Washington Taps Into a Potent New Force in Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17media.html>

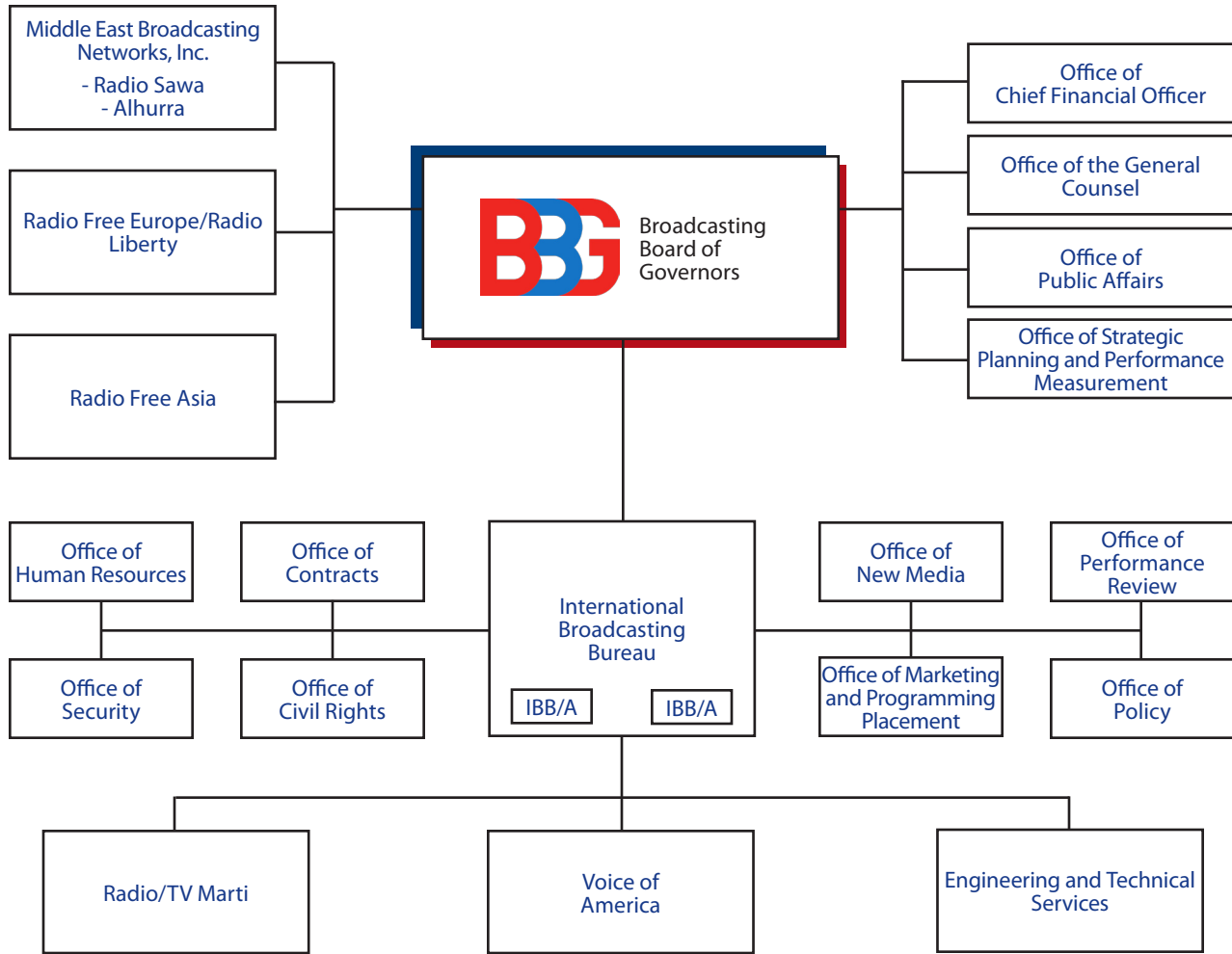
2. Department of Defense, Sumit Agarwal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (PA) for Citizen Dialogue & New/Social Media, <http://www.defense.gov/bios/biographydetail.aspx?biographyid=242>.

3. The White House, "President Obama's Speech: A New Beginning" (February 19, 2010), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/newbeginning/transcripts/>

4. Jeff Zeleny, "Multiple Channels for Obama's Cairo Speech," *The New York Times*' The Lede, June 3, 2009. <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/multiple-channels-for-obamas-cairo-speech/>

5. James Glassman, "Public Diplomacy 2.0," Remarks at the New America Foundation, December 12, 2008. [http://www.newamerica.net/events/2008/public\\_diplomacy\\_2\\_0](http://www.newamerica.net/events/2008/public_diplomacy_2_0).

Figure 7: Broadcasting Board of Governors Organizational Chart



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors (January 2010), <http://www.bbg.gov/about/orgchart.html>.

age of information abundance, its proper role and mission relative to private and non-profit information providers, whether resources are currently allocated in ways that support those objectives, how to streamline BBG operations to make the most effective use of scarce resources, and how to most effectively engage with other U.S. government agencies and the private sector without violating its legislative mandate of independence.

### Recommendations for Further Reform

The Obama administration is right to expend effort on building its capacity for strategic public engagement — even as it must avoid the trap of getting too focused on wiring diagrams at the expense of influencing the perceptions of foreign publics. We recommend the following steps to further enable the administration to carry out its ambitious goals:

- *At the NSC*, emphasize the coordination and integration of public engagement activities across government agencies and delegate operational activities. Ensure that public engagement policies and activities are coordinated not just across agencies but also within other directorates at the NSC focused on regional affairs and functional areas such as counterterrorism. Develop a government-wide public engagement strategy to implement the forthcoming national security strategy. Develop government-wide public engagement strategies for all major items on the president's foreign policy agenda.
- *At the State Department*, develop a more unified public engagement strategy and organization that coordinates public affairs and public diplomacy across the department's many centers of power. Develop a strategy that will convince Congress to fund public diplomacy activities at a higher level and build the institutional capacity (including the cultivation of public diplomacy and public affairs talent at embassies around the world) to execute that strategy.
- *At the Pentagon*, continue to strengthen oversight over information operations and ensure that tactical operations are in line with overall strategies. Assess the public engagement activities of combatant commands and determine which public engagement functions are best left to civilian agencies.
- *At the Broadcasting Board of Governors*, conduct a major external review of the BBG and U.S. broadcasting strategy. Give particular attention to the future of Alhurra the U.S. funded Arabic language television outlet.

## V. CONCLUSION

*"What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task."*

— President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 2009

In many ways, the administration is on the right track in its efforts to rebuild and reorient America's relationship with foreign publics. It has given U.S. relations with the world a fresh start, made engagement central to its strategy, made concerns about foreign public opinion a real part of the foreign policy-making process and changed the tone of presidential rhetoric in ways that advance U.S. interests. Major public engagement efforts are underway in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Muslim communities worldwide, and to a lesser extent with China. There has been top-level support not only from the White House but also from the key cabinet-level officials. The NSC-led organizational structure is workable even if it is not yet reaching its potential. Reform efforts within State and DOD are proceeding even if they still have far to go. The nature of America's discourse with the world has changed substantially, and the government is working hard to reap the benefits of this opening. The use of new media has been impressive.

Many challenges remain. As the Obama administration continues into its second year, it is time to capitalize on the promise of a new relationship with the world. This will require the administration to move beyond organizational reform and strategizing and on to implementation, a task for which it is still insufficiently

equipped. In so doing, the administration will need a coherent global vision as well as detailed strategic engagement plans to accomplish its major foreign policy initiatives. It will need bolder new initiatives, more efforts to engage American and foreign voices outside of the government, better interagency coordination and better follow-through. Finally, it needs to build the relationships necessary for successful global engagement in the long term and help a new generation of young people understand what America stands for in the world.

The effort to engage foreign populations will not be easy. The United States is competing for attention in an international information environment that is at once vibrant and dizzying. It confronts publics that both admire America because of its principles and hold America to a potentially unreachable standard because of them. Official public engagement efforts are dwarfed by the millions of ways America — as opposed to the American government — touches foreign populations every day. Yet, the U.S. government has not found a way to take best advantage of this reality.

**Most importantly, America as a nation appears unsure of its own role and voice in the world and is highly divided internally.** President Obama and his administration must remind Americans why we need to understand and engage the world around us, regardless of political orientation or feelings about the president. America transcends American politics, and it is possible to forge some areas of bipartisan consensus about America's role in the world, as evidenced by the strong commitment to public diplomacy shared by both Senator Kerry and Senator Lugar, Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Engaging the world is essential. Though our country is strong and characterized by a unique

history and distinctive set of values, we are not sufficiently powerful to solve all the world's problems alone, nor should we wish to do so. We cannot protect even our own long-term security without the help of others, nor should we countenance a world where that is required. It is time to renew America's capacity for global leadership by reaffirming the values and interests we share with friends, investing in a better understanding of the world around us, reaching out to a new generation of young people around the world, standing firmly on the side of justice and freedom, and restoring America's moral authority. This is a vision that will protect American security and realize America's potential. It is a vision worthy of American ideals.

## ENDNOTES

1. More than 30 recent reports have recommended specific changes in U.S. public diplomacy. For summaries and a bibliography, see Kennon H. Nakamura and Matthew C. Weed, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and Current Issues* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 18 December 2009) and Kristin M. Lord, *Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2008).
2. *Global Unease with Major World Powers*, Pew Global Attitudes Project (Washington: 27 June 2007).
3. Mark Knoller, "Obama Heads to Asia, Breaks Foreign Travel Record," *CBS News* (11 November 2009), <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/11/11/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry5618462.shtml>.
4. Ben Rhodes, "A Year Taking on Unprecedented Challenges Abroad," *The White House Blog* (12 January 2010), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/01/12/a-year-taking-unprecedented-challenges-abroad>.
5. For a discussion see Richard Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, eds., *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington: CSIS, 2007).
6. Department of State, "Secretary Clinton: 2009 Travel" (no date), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/trvl/2009/index.htm>.
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