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U.S. Public Diplomacy, Back to the Future [1]

Readers of this space know there's been a recent flurry of public activity by those who set the course of U.S. communications efforts with foreign publics. This week's unusual Congressional hearing on the State Department's public diplomacy programs featured not only the current ranking official for public diplomacy, Under Secretary Judith McHale, talking about her new "Strategic Approach for the 21st Century," but also three of her predecessors. Next week there's an open session of the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, also taking up how the State Department carries out its public affairs/public diplomacy role.

Judging by what's been said so far, the news is less about grand strategy for an entire century than how to return public diplomacy to a prominent place in the country's foreign policy.

What the State Department is trying to do, ten years after swallowing up the U.S. Information Agency, is to put some added impetus and authority behind its efforts to communicate with and influence foreign publics. The job titles of some key public diplomacy positions in Foggy Bottom will be upgraded, and some of the public diplomacy turf that the State Department had ceded to the Pentagon in recent years will be reclaimed.

These changes may seem modest but, if implemented, they will be the first good news in quite a while for State's public diplomacy officials, who have grown accustomed in recent years to frequent turnover in leadership in Washington and reduced influence and authority at U.S. embassies overseas.

As for field operations, McHale told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that her model for State's work in public diplomacy would borrow from the sort of full-court approach now underway in Pakistan, called the "Pakistan Plan:"

> The Pakistan Plan has four broad goals: expand media outreach, counter extremist propaganda, build communications capacity, and strengthen people-to-people ties. Our plan links elements of traditional public diplomacy with innovative new tools. For instance, recognizing that extremist voices dominate in some of Pakistan's media markets, we instituted a rapid response unit and a 24-hour multilingual hotline for the Embassy to respond to attacks, threats, and propaganda from the Taliban, al Qaeda, and their sympathizers…
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> As we strengthen our people-to-people ties with Pakistanis, our aim has been to increase positive American presence on the ground in Pakistan. To do this we are focusing on more exchanges, more presence, more Lincoln Centers, more face-to-face meetings with engaged citizens in Pakistan, and more non-official contacts between Pakistanis and Americans in Pakistan.
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> Secretary Clinton's October 2009 visit to Pakistan was planned and executed in

> coordination with the themes of our strategic plan. Her focus on issues of education, jobs, and reliable electric power responded to what we had identified as central concerns of Pakistanis. Her extensive series of public engagement activities carried out the Plan's emphasis on rejuvenating our personal, face-to-face diplomacy. Her visits to historical and cultural venues underscored American respect for and desire
> for partnership with the people of Pakistan. Perhaps the most telling moment came during a press conference during which Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi stated that the Secretary's visit had been a success precisely because it had manifested "policy shift" toward a focus on "people-centric" relations. This was and is precisely our message.

This kind of analytical and strategic approach has many precedents in the annals of U.S. public diplomacy. It represents the kind of seamless connection between diplomacy and public diplomacy that was supposed to result naturally from the consolidation of USIA into the State Department. However, this synergy and coordination were often missing, hamstrung by a lack of leadership and funding.

An upgraded, integrated and well-funded public diplomacy will not overcome all obstacles or satisfy all critics. In Pakistan, U.S. drone aircraft missions transgress the country's sovereignty and reportedly kill innocent civilians. Public diplomacy is hard pressed to deal with the consequences of such secret operations. Still, President Obama and Secretary Clinton have done an exceptional job so far of reaching out to world publics overall, and now, at last, there's a sense that the cadre of professionals charged with supporting the President and Secretary in their public diplomacy efforts may finally get the authority and resources they need to do that job.

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