

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Secretary Clinton's Well-Founded Alarm about "Information War" ^[1]

In testimony to Congress last week, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the existence of an ongoing "information war" that the United States is losing. In addition to saying that "Al Jazeera is winning," Clinton pointed to the major investments in international broadcasting being made by China and Russia.

The Chinese effort is of particular importance. As Secretary Clinton said, "We are in a competition for influence with China; let's put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let's just talk straight realpolitik."

China has designed a significant part of its public diplomacy as a means of courting countries that are sources of natural resources that China needs. Secretary Clinton pointed to Papua New Guinea, with its great reserves of oil and natural gas, as one of these targets.

International broadcasting projects, along with programs such as the Confucius Institutes, are at the heart of China's strategic courtship campaign. Unlike the United States, China takes these matters seriously and has designed an approach to public diplomacy that is well-funded, imaginative, and fully integrated within its overall foreign policy. As a recent report from Senator Richard Lugar and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee illustrated, the gap between U.S. and Chinese public diplomacy capabilities is widening, with China steadily pulling farther ahead.

Clinton's remarks were particularly welcome as a note of realism from a State Department that often is primarily interested in self-congratulation rather than adapting to the verities of power politics in a media-centric world. Information dissemination is a matter of national security, and it is time the U.S. government treated it as such.

Congress should heed Secretary Clinton's warning and not relegate U.S. public diplomacy to a nickel-and-dime sideshow. In budgeters' worldview, public diplomacy might not be as sexy as weapons systems, but it is absolutely essential if the information war and the larger battle for influence are to be won.
