



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivers remarks at the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) Global Emerging Technology Summit in Washington, DC, July 13, 2021. Jim Watson/Pool via REUTERS

Twenty-First-Century Diplomacy

Strengthening US Diplomacy for the Challenges of Today and Tomorrow

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The Scowcroft Center's Project on Twenty-First-Century Diplomacy

Earlier this year, the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security launched a project on twenty-first-century diplomacy to address how US diplomacy should adapt to meet twenty-first-century challenges. To begin this project, the center hosted a workshop that brought together diplomats, scholars, technologists, and other experts to share their insights on this important topic. This paper benefited greatly from the insights of participants in that workshop, and summarizes the key conclusions.

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Introduction and Executive Summary

How should US diplomacy adapt for the twenty-first century? The practice of diplomacy has changed drastically over the past several decades, with the return of great power rivalry, the emergence of the new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and the rise of other important developments. Yet, while scholars and strategists have devoted enormous attention to how these new developments affect other domains, such as the future of warfare, they have devoted scant attention to the changing nature of diplomacy. If we believe, however, that diplomacy is a—if not the—most important tool of American statecraft, then twenty-first-century diplomacy deserves the same level of sustained attention. This paper will seek to characterize the changing nature of diplomacy with the objective of helping US and allied diplomats more effectively practice strategy and statecraft.

This issue brief considers two key questions.

1. How is the context of twenty-first-century diplomacy different from that of the past?
2. How can US diplomacy begin to adapt for the twenty-first century?

In answering the first question, this issue brief will focus on the most salient change in the international balance of power—the rise of China—in addition to the current technological revolution. After outlining how these changes have affected the context in which the United States conducts diplomacy, this issue brief will suggest several proposals to adapt US diplomacy to the twenty-first century. These suggestions will address both how changes in the global context—especially technology—have affected the conduct of US diplomacy and how US diplomacy can best respond to China’s rise and the 4IR.

We will argue that US diplomacy must do the following.

- *Get smart on tech at the US State Department*, including through cultivating a creative workforce with diverse skills, improving training on technology and science, and investing in the potential of new technologies for diplomacy.
- *Reinvigorate engagement with institutions, countries, and individuals*, including by reasserting US leadership in multilateral bodies to ensure they advance US interests, especially on shaping norms for new technologies and challenging China’s authoritarian influence; redoubling efforts to engage frequently and personally with those countries and regions where China is attempting to increase its influence; and reinvesting in strategic communications, information statecraft, and public diplomacy.
- *Advance partnerships with likeminded nations to lead in the digital age*, including by leveraging smaller, less formal pacts, such as the Quad, and potentially creating a new, formal alliance centered on technology leadership.



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In short, the twin hallmarks of twenty-first-century diplomacy are effectiveness operating in—and shaping—the digital world, complemented by widespread, sustained, and personal efforts to reinforce global recognition that US values-based leadership is needed to compete with China’s authoritarian model.

A New World for Diplomacy

The Rise of China

Senior US and allied diplomats learned their craft in an era of US and western dominance, but that period of history has come to an end. They need to adjust to a world of great power rivalry. The past thirty years witnessed dramatic shifts in the global balance of power. In economic terms alone, significant changes are under way. In the 1990s, at the height of the unipolar moment, around 70 percent of global economic activity took place in Europe and the Americas. In the next few decades, that number is likely to drop to about 40 percent, with Asia projected to account for the majority of global gross domestic product (GDP) by mid-century.¹ A key part of this shift has been the rise of China, which has experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades.

In the early 2000s, many leaders in the United States and around the world hoped that China would become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. Instead, China has refused to play by the rules, and has only grown more assertive. President Xi Jinping has launched the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on a revisionist course that directly challenges US power,

prosperity, and values. The last two presidential administrations have acknowledged this challenge in major strategy documents. The Donald Trump administration characterized “long-term, strategic competition” by “revisionist powers” as the “central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security,” while the Joe Biden administration described China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”²

China’s growing influence has extended into the diplomatic and Political domains. China has attempted to dominate international institutions, including by winning elections to key leadership positions—often turning them away from their intended purpose and coercing multilateral bodies to avoid or soften criticism of China.³ For example, in 2020, China persuaded dozens of countries to back its crackdown on Hong Kong’s democracy at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council. As one commentator observed at the time, “Beijing has effectively leveraged the UN Human Rights Council to endorse the very activities it was created to oppose.”⁴ Multilateral forums are now a contested space in which the United States will have to reassert leadership and influence.

China has expanded its global megaphone and engaged in efforts to influence narratives about the CCP. Beijing pursues these efforts through multiple means, such as support for Confucius Institutes at universities around the world. These bodies are known to proffer materials that whitewash the CCP’s history and to curtail any discussion of Taiwan.⁵ US diplomacy will need to redouble efforts to engage with publics and challenge the propaganda machines of adversaries.

China has combined its economic power and diplomatic engagement to develop partnerships around the world.

Through efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has combined its economic power and diplomatic engagement to develop partnerships around the world. BRI participants include much of Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Southeast Asia, along with some in Latin America and Eastern and Southern Europe. The United States cannot afford to de-prioritize these regions while Beijing increases its influence.

China is employing all the tools of statecraft, including diplomacy, “to shape a world consistent with [its] authoritarian model.”⁶ The CCP trains officials from other countries on China’s governance and economic model.⁷ In the technological space, Beijing has pushed for authoritarian norms, such as greater national sovereignty over the Internet, via mechanisms such as the BRI’s “Digital Silk Road” initiative. It has also worked with other governments on controlling information flows, and has exported advanced surveillance technology.⁸ As one report observed, “Loans from Beijing have made surveillance technology available to governments that could not previously afford it, while China’s authoritarian system has diminished the transparency and accountability of its use.”⁹

US diplomacy must support a whole-of-government effort to lead the 4IR and shape the rules and norms governing twenty-first century technology.

Before turning to the next major trend that has reshaped the context for US diplomacy, two qualifying notes are in order. First, China is not the only state-based challenge to international peace and stability. Russia remains a nuclear-armed power that, despite its economic weakness vis-à-vis the United States and China, has demonstrated a willingness to employ force to achieve its ends. In addition, rogue states, such as North Korea and Iran, have the capacity to disrupt US interests in their respective regions and threaten American lives. The United States cannot afford to ignore Russia or the threats from rogue states, but China's power and influence across different domains make it a more significant long-term challenge for the United States.

Still, this is not to say that US and allied diplomats are operating from a position of weakness. Despite shifts in the global balance of power, the United States remains the world's largest economy according to nominal GDP, and it possesses a top-notch military. Unlike China and other adversaries, the United States benefits from a vast network of alliances and partnerships that strengthen its ability to project power throughout the world. The US share of global GDP has remained fairly stable over the past few decades. Combined, the United States and its treaty allies make up around 60 percent of global GDP, far more than what China and other revisionist autocracies can muster.¹⁰ In short, while US diplomacy must navigate the challenge of a new great-power rivalry, it is not doing so from a position of weakness.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Digitalized World

Alongside the rise of China, the past few decades witnessed a new industrial revolution with increasing digitalization and technological development. This means that US and allied diplomats must be prepared to operate in a digitalized world and effectively wield digital tools to their advantage.

First, the fast flow of information through nondiplomatic channels has resulted in several changes. Non-state actors now have greater access to data and information, increasing their influence. The rapid dissemination of information has also, in many cases, shortened the window for senior diplomats to respond and get ahead of events on the ground. The public is also better able to scrutinize government actions; however, governments also have a more diverse set of tools for engaging with the public and crafting messaging to improve perception of their performance.¹¹

Digitalization has also created openings for increased freedom in some respects, as digital tools can be used to organize movements and circumvent censorship. On the other hand, authoritarian actors can harness digital tools for nefarious ends, as China has done in Xinjiang, implementing a regional mass-surveillance network replete with facial-recognition technology and biometric-

data collection. Moreover, autocratic adversaries have taken advantage of social media and other communication tools to spread disinformation.

Additionally, the 4IR is marked by the development of various technologies, ranging from artificial intelligence to additive manufacturing. The technologies of the 4IR will reshape economies and militaries. To name just a few examples, artificial intelligence is essential for driverless cars and can rapidly synthesize large pools of information; hypersonic weaponry could be used to evade missile defenses; and fifth-generation (5G) wireless technology (and future generations) will facilitate further digitalization at faster speeds.

The United States must understand and address the consequences of these developments over the next few decades. We know technological leadership in the early industrial revolutions helped solidify the global dominance of Western Europe, and US innovation leadership since the time of Thomas Edison has been critical for sustaining US power. The countries that lead in the development of the technologies of the 4IR will be well positioned to prosper in this era, and to shape the norms that guide the use of these technologies.

China is already trying to dominate the commanding heights of twenty-first-century technology. Unlike the United States and its allies and partners, China wants authoritarian norms to govern the digital world and emerging technologies. Winning the twenty-first-century tech race would put China in prime position to surpass the United States as the world's premier economic and military power. US diplomacy will need to adapt urgently to prevent this outcome.

Adapting to a Changing Context

US and allied diplomats must adapt to the challenges of twenty-first century statecraft.

Indeed, they are already moving in this direction. Just this spring, the State Department launched a new Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy, which is a noteworthy measure in streamlining the department's approach to cyber and technology issues. However, a new State Department office is not nearly enough to confront the myriad challenges of this new era and seize upon the opportunities to promote US security and prosperity.

Indeed, in its current form, the State Department is still too much of a nineteenth-century institution in a modern world. The current generation of diplomats came of age in the unipolar moment and post-9/11 era. This generational challenge, in conjunction with an organizational culture that discourages unconventional thinking, impedes effective twenty-first-century diplomacy. With a changing global landscape, US diplomats need to think creatively, with fresh approaches.

The State Department—the principal diplomatic arm of the US government—will need to become tech savvy at home, reinvigorate personal diplomacy and engage with publics abroad, and work with allies and partners to harness the 4IR and excel in a digital world.



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Get Smart on Tech at Home

Twenty-first-century diplomacy starts at home, with a concerted effort to make the State Department more technologically capable.

Create a Tech-Smart Workforce

The State Department needs a creative, entrepreneurial, and innovative workforce that can readily identify and incorporate new technologies into its daily work. To do this, the department needs hiring practices that actively seek out tech-smart staff to serve as the backbone of a more innovation-minded department. Some progress is already being made toward this end: the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), for example, has established a job category for data scientists. The State Department should also consider tech knowledge as part of its assessment of Foreign Service Officers and other hires throughout the department. In addition, it should incentivize tech training by making professional development in this space a consideration for promotions.¹² A fundamental degree of tech literacy is critical for effective twenty-first century statecraft.

Furthermore, US diplomats need technical training on technology that helps them understand how technology relates to their Portfolios, particularly in the context of competition with China, Russia, and other rivals and adversaries. Issues related to digital infrastructure, privacy, intelligence, digital currency, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence must be studied in connection to defending vital US interests abroad. The State Department should explore collaborating with other institutions, including universities and think tanks, to educate staff and solicit fresh perspectives on the intersection of tech and US interests.

Congress should ensure that the State Department uses its resources efficiently and effectively to hire and train a workforce with technological skills. The department—a large agency—should identify current areas of duplication, waste, or outdated processes, and replace these with streamlined efforts to update the department’s approach.

Invest in Emerging Tech

Emerging technology also provides opportunities to augment and improve the processing and dissemination of information within the State Department.

When used by the United States, artificial intelligence has the ability to rapidly sift through data and make predictions based on patterns in a way that exceeds the speed and accuracy of human processing. For example, new applications and technologies can sort through data points from social media and other open-source content in key countries, and produce summaries that distill the most vital information. These capabilities create great efficiencies in that they save diplomats from spending their valuable time scrolling through social media themselves and more time for the practice of diplomacy. At the same time, experience and expertise remain important in the conduct of diplomacy, and the implementation of artificial intelligence in processing information must be matched with skilled practitioners who possess the necessary context to put these vital data into practice. In short, new technologies will serve mostly to enhance, not replace, the work of human diplomats.

Reinvigorate Engagement with Institutions, Countries, and Individuals

Incorporating new technology is vital to the State Department’s work, but it is not a silver bullet. Despite technological advances, face-to-face diplomacy remains the gold standard of US diplomacy. Personal demarches, letters, in-person summits, and meetings remain among the most important diplomatic tools.

These traditional methods of diplomacy are essential to countering China’s influence in particular. Around the world, China seeks to displace the United States as the preeminent power—and, in certain cases, the chosen partner. In order to counter China’s efforts, US diplomats must maintain a forward and active presence in all regions of the world. They cannot hide behind the convenience of technology. In this regard, the State Department, and the US government broadly, should be prudent in adapting to the technological revolution. Time-tested methods of diplomacy are still an essential component of furthering US interests abroad.

Reassert Leadership in Multilateral Institutions

In recent decades, overwhelming US influence incentivized American diplomats to perceive international institutions as neutral bodies, or worse, to neglect them altogether. In this new era

of great power competition, however, US and allied diplomats will need to relearn how to use multilateral institutions as an instrument of American power and statecraft.

The United States played a critical role in establishing many of these institutions after the Second World War. However, China has now engaged in *competitive multilateralism* to undermine US interests and increase its own influence within bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organization (WTO), and UN Human Rights Council, deliberately weakening the organizations' founding missions.

International standard-setting organizations will shape future technologies and determine how artificial intelligence (AI) and 5G, for example, are implemented worldwide. China has aimed to infiltrate these organizations as well, by placing Chinese nationals in senior leadership positions, increasing the representation of Chinese tech companies within them, and garnering support for Chinese-state backed initiatives.¹³ The United States, its allies, and its partners should leverage their collective power and influence to push back against China and autocratic rivals, and ensure these institutions advance US and allied interests. Together, working with likeminded partners, the United States should utilize all available tools, including redoubling efforts to win leadership elections and, where appropriate, withholding or increasing funding and participation to ensure that these institutions fulfill their founding missions.

Focus on Personal Diplomacy and Relationship Building

In an era of overwhelming power, US diplomacy tended to prioritize key regions and often engaged in benign neglect in other regions. In this new era of great power rivalry, China has filled the vacuum to the detriment of American interests. Diplomats must once again relearn the Cold War era skills of viewing the entire world as the setting of a contest for influence and power.

China is actively combining its military, economic, political, and diplomatic power to cultivate partnerships throughout the world, from traditionally nonaligned countries in Africa to NATO members in Eastern Europe. China is especially good at personal engagement, approaching countries with a robust on-the-ground presence to strengthen ties and leverage them to Beijing's advantage. Through debt diplomacy, a favored tool of the CCP, China has gained control of a port in Sri Lanka. It is also reportedly constructing a naval base in Cambodia, and has concluded a pact with the Solomon Islands. These are just a few examples of China's reach.

US diplomacy needs to counter Chinese influence by recommitting to personal diplomacy and frequent engagement with countries throughout the world, to draw them away from China's orbit.

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US diplomacy must be predicated on steady, sustained, and personal engagement to nourish relationships and remind countries of the benefits of ties with the United States. The United States needs to approach countries with a clear understanding of their interests and needs. It needs to **compete** with China across all areas of engagement. In the technology realm, the United States must be tireless in its efforts to persuade allies and partners to reject Huawei-built 5G digital infrastructure, which invites a severe security threat into US alliances and partnerships, and exposes recipient nations to coercion, espionage, and sabotage in the future. US diplomats must make this case to allies and partners around the world. Accepting money, technology, or other resources from Beijing—no matter how attractive—makes a state vulnerable to CCP coercion. Washington must also offer a positive alternative that plays to its strengths. While the US government will not make large loans with no strings attached, it can offer higher quality, transparent, and environmentally friendly development aid and other assistance that the CCP cannot match.

Bolster Public Diplomacy

The United States must also compete in the communications and public-diplomacy domains.

Its rivals have taken advantage of the communications potential of the digital age to proliferate disinformation through social media and other venues. Moreover, China and other adversaries use a global media network to advance narratives favorable to authoritarianism.

The United States needs to invest in information statecraft, strategic communications, and public diplomacy to challenge disinformation, promote truthful narratives about authoritarians, engage with the people living in repressive regimes, contrast the US way of life with the perils of authoritarianism, and cultivate support for US values and freedom. Information warfare was a critical component of the US Cold War strategy, and it should remain a vital tool of statecraft.

- The United States can, and should, support an economy of independent media organizations in foreign nations focused on fair and accurate reporting.
- Congress should ensure that information statecraft is conducted efficiently, effectively, and vigorously by various government agencies, such as the Global Engagement Center (GEC) and US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Importantly, USAGM includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, which must remain strong and proud voices for US exceptionalism and freedom.¹⁴
- The US government should also work with NATO allies and other European partners to develop joint-funding mechanisms.¹⁵ Priority should be given to media entities in countries operating in regions particularly vulnerable to disinformation.

Advance Partnerships with Likeminded Nations to Lead in the Digital Age

The United States must also forge strong alliances and partnerships with likeminded nations in the technology domain in order to compete effectively, achieve tech dominance, and further US security, political, and economic interests in all regions of the world.

Leverage Ad Hoc Coalitions and Pursue Formal Partnerships

US diplomats should work to strengthen ad hoc or less formal arrangements with allies and partners to maintain their traditional technological leadership position. Momentum toward greater democratic cooperation on the technologies of the 4IR is already under way. Despite US and European Union (EU) differences concerning regulation, the new US-EU Trade and Technology Council suggests a mutual desire to overcome obstacles and forge a common transatlantic path forward on emerging technology.

Moreover, the last two administrations elevated the importance of the Quad, and Quad leaders met in person for the first time in 2021. Quad member states appear poised to increase cooperation on technological development, with Shinji Inoue, Japan's science and technology minister, saying in 2021, "It is very important for the Quad countries...which share common values, to cooperate in emerging technologies so that sustainable, inclusive, resilient economic growth can be promoted in the Indo-Pacific region."¹⁶ Quad members agreed to establish a task force on advanced technologies and develop standards for AI and 5G.

Furthermore, the AUKUS pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced in 2021, is also prioritizing emerging technology, especially in a defense context. In November, then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the pact would "enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability, with an initial focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities," adding that the three countries would boost cooperation "in advanced and critical technologies and capabilities."¹⁷

The development of new technologies may also lend itself to additional diplomatic initiatives in the years ahead. To best utilize AI, for example, countries will need to cooperate to share data, while maintaining respect for privacy. In order to capitalize on the potential benefits of AI, the United States should work to establish a data-sharing arrangement with allies and partners. The agreement should ensure data are shared in a safe and secure manner that respects privacy, but also allow the United States and its allies and partners to advance technological innovation.

This progress is welcome, and US diplomats might also consider building on these initiatives to work toward formal technology-alliance structures with likeminded partners. A recent article by Ash

Jain and Matthew Kroenig outlines how these initial steps could also lead to a broader democratic technology alliance.¹⁸

US diplomacy has a vital role to play in cultivating a coordinated front on technology. Winning the twenty-first-century tech race will be a boon to US and allied military and economic interests, and allow these countries to establish the rules and norms that will govern the digital age for years to come.

Export Digital-Information Infrastructure with Democratic Values

Whereas China and other adversaries have sought to use technology to export autocracy and repression, the United States should seek to export digital information infrastructure that promotes freedom, privacy, and the rule of law. As Ambassador Eileen Donahoe has written, AI has been a “game changer in favor of authoritarian states,” particularly China.¹⁹ The CCP has exported its domestic-surveillance software around the world. As of 2019, eighteen countries are using Chinese-made intelligent monitoring systems.²⁰ The spread of these technology systems allows China to export repression, control, and coercion, undermining freedom and shaping the international system to Beijing’s benefit.

Countering China’s efforts in this space will be challenging. In Africa, China provides more funds for information and communication technologies than all multilateral development agencies and the world’s leading democracies combined.²¹ The United States should build on efforts started at last year’s Summit for Democracy, including the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) digital-democracy work and funding for “democracy affirming” technologies—alongside the Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative, which aims to limit the flow of technology to authoritarian countries.²² The United States can also work through mechanisms such as the Blue Dot Network, which certifies infrastructure projects, to promote secure, democratically-aligned digital infrastructure.

While these efforts are important, the United States will also need to work to convince countries outside of its traditional allies and partners to turn away from authoritarian technologies. These efforts will be challenging, but the United States must use its substantial economic and diplomatic power to encourage nations to adopt US and partnered technologies by offering them at a reduced price (e.g., through tax incentives to the private sector), guaranteeing technical support for these systems, or providing them in return for other benefits that the United States or its allies can give to recipient nations. The United States and its allies can also leverage the superior capability and quality of their technology to make the case that partnership with them is a better option.

Conclusion

This issue brief has outlined both the challenges and opportunities of this new era and made several recommendations for how US diplomacy can be strengthened for the twenty-first century. We recommended improving training for American diplomats, reasserting American leadership and engagement abroad, and advancing partnerships with likeminded nations to lead in the digital age. These steps are necessary, but not sufficient. Significant work remains to be done to fully update US diplomacy to the challenges of our time.

America's tradition of diplomacy has long been vital to advancing American security and prosperity, and, if adapted appropriately along the lines suggested in this brief, it will be equally essential to advancing US and allied interests in the twenty-first century.

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