

Statement of

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Concerning

**“The Global Information Wars:
Is the U.S. Winning or Losing?”**

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Thank you, Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Hagerty, and Distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting me to address you today. As you are aware, the United States is engaged in what I would characterize as a [persistent, asymmetric competition](#) with authoritarian challengers that is taking place across at least four, interconnected, non-military domains:

- Politics, and here I am thinking primarily, but not solely, about interference in democratic processes and efforts to denigrate democratic governments;
- Economics, specifically the accumulation and application of [coercive leverage](#) and the use of [strategic corruption](#);
- Technology, which intersects with all other domains, but is a competitive domain in its own right; and
- Information, which may be the most consequential terrain over which states will compete in the next decades.

The last is where I will focus today.

It is within the information domain that autocrats – in Moscow and Beijing, but also elsewhere – have [leveraged](#) some of the sharpest asymmetries. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping deliberately spread or amplify information that is false or misleading. Both operate vast propaganda networks that use multiple modes of communication to disseminate their preferred, often slanted, versions of events. Both spread numerous, often conflicting, conspiracy theories designed to deflect blame for their own wrongdoing, dent the prestige of the United States, and cast doubt on the notion of objective truth. And both frequently engage in “[whataboutism](#)” to frame the United States and its way of doing business as hypocritical, while using a network of proxy influencers to churn up anti-American sentiment around the world. For Putin and Xi, the

goal of these pursuits is to tighten their grip on power at home and weaken their democratic competitors abroad. For Xi, it is also about positioning China as a responsible global player.

For the United States, like other democracies, an open information environment confers tremendous long-term advantages, but it also creates near-term vulnerabilities that can be exploited using low-cost, often deniable tools and tactics. Where [democracies depend on the idea that the truth is knowable](#) and citizens can discern it to govern themselves, autocrats have no such need for a healthy information environment to thrive. In fact, autocrats benefit from widespread public skepticism that objective truth exists at all. Because autocrats tightly control their information environments, they are more insulated from critics than their democratic competitors. Although Moscow and Beijing effectively ban many Western social media platforms at home, they are able to use them quite effectively to engage audiences abroad. In doing so, they face [virtually no normative constraints on lying nor concern for commercial repercussions](#). As a result of these asymmetries, autocrats have made remarkable information advances.

To date, the United States and other liberal democracies have been [slow to appreciate the nature of the contest](#) and to develop a proactive strategy to push back on those advances. This is partially driven by the challenge of developing a coherent threat assessment when so much of the relevant activity is taking place on smart phones instead of traditional battlefields. But it is primarily a result of the hands-off approach that democratic societies have traditionally taken to dealing with information—and for good reason, given that they risk contravening George Kennan’s admonition not to become like those against whom they are “[coping](#).” Those constraints make it hard for democratic societies to contend with this challenge, but they need not prevent success.

Recognizing that competition is ultimately about the pursuit and use of advantages, the United States should develop a [strategy](#) to leverage myriad asymmetric advantages of its own – both within the information domain and beyond it – to push back on Moscow and Beijing’s information advances.

AN INFORMATION STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED STATES

To start with, the United States can [seize the initiative](#) by harnessing truthful information to defend its interests and the integrity of the global information environment. To do this, Washington should take the so-called [persistent engagement](#) approach that the United States has applied to cyberspace and [carry it into the information domain](#). This would involve concerted campaigns that are grounded in truthful messaging designed to expose the failures and false promises of dictatorship, including corruption and repression. Such an approach would be in keeping with a [strategy of exploiting Moscow and Beijing’s weaknesses](#), recognizing that competition is ultimately about the pursuit and use of advantages.

Importantly, the [focus of these efforts](#) should not be on refuting false information, but on affirmatively highlighting the strengths of democratic governance models and exposing the

corruption and repression of autocratic challengers. There are at least two audiences for this content. First, individuals who live within repressive societies. Second, those in societies where democracy is backsliding or not fully consolidated, where truthful information can help build resilience against disinformation and propaganda.

To that end, recognizing that independent media keeps citizens informed and holds power to account, Washington should [support high quality journalism abroad](#), particularly in places where democracy is backsliding. And it should promote freedom of information globally – not just because it is in keeping with democratic values, but because it puts autocrats at a disadvantage, given that their grip on power depends on strict control of information.

Ultimately, succeeding in the information domain will require action beyond it, since that is where some of the United States’s most valuable advantages lie. These include advanced cyber capabilities, global financial markets, robust rule of law, and a vibrant network of partners. Washington could, for example, use its cyber capabilities to undermine the ability of its competitors to carry out malign activity online – as it reportedly did by [taking the Kremlin’s proxy troll farm operation offline](#) for a few days around the 2018 midterms, by [conducting an operation that targeted Iran](#) ahead of the 2020 presidential election, and by conducting “[full spectrum operations](#)” before, during, and after the midterms in 2022. Washington could also use the power and centrality of its economy to impose costs on those who carry out destructive, state-backed information manipulation campaigns.

The United States should do all of this in coordination with other democratic societies, leveraging what might well be its most important strategic advantage: a strong network of partners and alliances. This should include sharing information about threats and collaborating on responses that are rooted in democratic values, [because those values are strengths](#). Ultimately, the information competition is not just a contest between nations, but a [struggle](#) over systems and principles.

ADVANCING THIS STRATEGY: THE ROLE OF USAGM

The U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) has a critical role to play in advancing this strategy. As I have argued in a forthcoming paper, co-written with colleagues at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and elsewhere, there are numerous steps that it can take to update its strategy for success in an era of information competition with autocrats. These include:

1. Focusing attention and resources on Latin America;
2. Leveraging Twenty-first Century digital tools to build a sophisticated picture of its audiences, assess the performance of its content, circumvent censorship, and boost the reach of its most compelling material;
3. Centering authentic local voices, borrowing an element of its competitor's strategy while keeping its commitment to journalistic excellence;
4. Focusing on themes that attract global audiences; and

5. Avoiding the temptation to be everywhere always, instead prioritizing the platforms where people get their news while utilizing the State Department's existing Content Commons.

Focus Attention and Resources on Latin America

Through the first quarter of 2023, three of the five most retweeted Russian state media accounts on Twitter messaged in Spanish, and five of the ten fastest growing ones targeted Spanish-language audiences. On YouTube too, RT en Español has also proven capable of building large audiences, despite the platform's [global ban](#) on Russian state-funded media channels. On TikTok, RT en Español is among the most popular Spanish-language media outlets. Its 29.6 million likes make it more popular than Telemundo, Univision, BBC Mundo, and El País. Likewise, on Facebook, RT en Español currently has more followers than any other Spanish-language international broadcaster.

China too, is succeeding in the region. Its Spanish-language broadcaster, CGTN en Español, has roughly six times more followers on Facebook than the United States' Spanish-language outlet, Voz de América. Venezuela's TeleSur and Iran's HispanTV also have amassed sizeable followings.

This at least partly, if not primarily, reflects a resource prioritization problem. In 2023, the [budget](#) for Voice of America (VOA)'s Latin America division was slightly more than \$10 million USD. That is less than half of the budget appropriated for its Eurasia division and less than a quarter of the budget appropriated for its East Asia and Pacific division. Of the [twelve overseas bureaus](#) operated by VOA, none are in Latin America. This reflects broader trends. From 2015 to 2020, U.S. public diplomacy financing overseen by the State Department (educational and cultural affairs spending, excluding broadcasting) consistently [deprioritized](#) the Western Hemisphere.

Recognizing the extent of [Russia's information manipulation efforts in Latin America](#) – and that with Spanish the [fourth-most spoken language in the world](#), Kremlin content produced for Latin American audiences could reach far beyond the region – USAGM should focus attention and resources there. This approach should include increasing investments in VOA broadcasting in Spanish and considering the feasibility of opening a regional bureau within Latin America. To the extent possible, it should also include facilitating exchanges between Spanish-language journalists in the United States and their counterparts in Latin America, as well as public-private partnerships to create low-cost distribution and content sharing agreements that would allow for material created by Spanish speakers in the United States to reach audiences through local, trusted sources.

As a country with 40 million native Spanish speakers and whose national security interests are directly affected by events in the region, the United States cannot afford to cede the information space in Latin America to its geopolitical competitors.

Leverage Twenty-first Century Digital Tools

What foreign audiences find appealing about the United States almost certainly differs from country to country and region to region. USAGM regional bureaus are best positioned to create and distribute material that resonates with their respective audiences – but not based on “best guesses.” USAGM should continue to [invest in social media analysis tools](#) that enable regional bureaus to understand the interests and concerns of their audiences. Doing so can equip them to develop tailored and compelling editorial propositions, which are essential for staying relevant in a crowded modern media market. These tools should be coupled with market research and social media analytics to evaluate the performance of USAGM content, since success will depend on continuously identifying and prioritizing the types of materials that are most impactful. This approach is in keeping with the State Department’s commitment to [data-informed diplomacy](#).

USAGM should also continue [supporting cutting-edge open internet and circumvention tools](#) that enable its journalists, among others, to provide independent, comprehensive, and objective news coverage. Doing so brings two advantages. First, it is a means of combatting the censorship that enables autocrats to thrive. Second, by facilitating news coverage that speaks truth to power and promotes an engaged citizenry, it builds resilience against disinformation propaganda in target societies around the world.

Finally, Washington should also consider whether AI systems could be used to translate USAGM or other high-quality content for dissemination in multiple languages. Recent advances could make it possible to do so quickly and at low cost, boosting the reach of USAGM’s most compelling materials.

Center Authentic Local Voices

Moscow and Beijing frequently use authentic domestic voices – for example, those of local journalists and activists – to improve the reach and resonance of their messaging, recognizing that doing so lends their content a degree of credibility. Moscow has [experimented](#) with a range of techniques, including [co-locating](#) trolls within a target population, [renting the social media accounts of local users](#) with the goal of using them to publish political ads or plant articles, and [hiring freelance journalists](#) to write political stories for an online publication secretly run by individuals linked to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), among others. Beijing, for its part, has long used foreigners in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda. “We have always attached great importance to ‘borrowing a mouth to speak’ and used international friends to carry out foreign propaganda,” [proclaimed](#) Zhu Ling, then-China Daily editor-in-chief, in a speech celebrating the newspaper’s 30th anniversary.

Without wavering from its [commitment](#) to uphold journalistic excellence, report facts without bias, and prioritize editorial transparency, USAGM could borrow an element of this approach and center the voices of local investigative journalists and civil society leaders, including rights defenders, in its content. Doing so may help that content strike a chord with

local audiences, especially in places where the United States may not be inherently trusted. It is an approach that is also in keeping with USAGM's commitment to engaging and empowering local populations.

Focus on Themes that Attract Global Audiences

The United States and other liberal democracies have struggled to develop a coherent post-Cold War message. As a result, Washington has frequently defaulted to emphasizing support for human rights and efforts to root out corruption – narratives that may resonate primarily with elites, or worse, be seen as hypocritical. Instead, U.S. public diplomacy should focus on themes that continue to attract global audiences, including the United States's capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship, its technological and scientific achievements, and its support for freedom of expression.

In its coverage of the United States, VOA should not hesitate to present the American experience in its full complexity. This includes critically assessing U.S. policy. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, for a United States Government-funded entity to reckon with its challenges. In fact, doing so may [resonate](#) in societies that are struggling to establish or consolidate their own democracies.

As appropriate, USAGM networks and programs could highlight authoritarian efforts to undermine democratic societies and institutions, as well as stories of resilience and resistance to repression. When relevant and as prudent, they could consider calling attention to the information manipulation strategies of Russia and China – in particular, whataboutism – giving care not to draw attention to content from Moscow and Beijing that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. In the fact of whataboutism, they should [resist the temptation to rebut each claim](#), recognizing that doing so only prolongs the conversation on the competitor's terms.

Don't Try to be Everywhere all the Time

As it works to disseminate content that audiences not only trust but use, USAGM should focus on the [places where people get their news](#): in many countries, Facebook and YouTube, much more so than Twitter. Drawing on the knowledge of professional content marketers, it might also explore whether there are best practices for reaching audiences on Whatsapp, given its popularity as a source of news in many contexts. There is wisdom in USAGM's [acknowledgment](#) that it cannot adopt every new platform in every target market.

At the same time, USAGM could also share its originals within the State Department's [Content Commons](#) so that they may be amplified by relevant public diplomats. The Content Commons is an important resource that provides public diplomacy professionals access to a searchable library of on-demand, cleared, license-free content. But users report that the current repository offers limited, and at times underwhelming, options – especially in video format. A

sharing arrangement could help mitigate that challenge, while helping to facilitate the dissemination of USAGM material to new audiences.

LOOKING AHEAD

The emerging competition between the United States and its authoritarian challengers is asymmetric in nature, and increasingly taking place far from traditional battlefields. Digital technologies are making it increasingly possible for autocrats to exploit the openness of democratic societies to disrupt them from within and to spread misleading propaganda around the world, to the detriment of U.S. interests. The United States needs a strategy for pushing back on these activities – one that meets the moment and draws on its considerable strengths. There are myriad steps such an approach could entail, some within the information domain, others beyond it. USAGM can play a central role. By focusing attention and resources on Latin America, leveraging Twenty-first Century digital tools, centering authentic local voices, focusing on themes that attract global audiences, and avoiding the temptation to be everywhere always, USAGM can position itself for success in today's information environment.