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On Modernizing American Foreign Policy

27 October 2021, Foreign Service Institute, Arlington, Virginia



Thank you all so much, and Julieta, thank you so much for your leadership of this remarkable institution, one that's increasingly vital to the future of our department, the future of our diplomacy. And to everyone here today, it's wonderful to see you. It's also wonderful to see so many of our colleagues in person face to face, or at least mask to mask.

To all of you joining us today -- please, thank you -- whether in person or via video, welcome. We have with us members of Congress, including I think virtually, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Meeks, representatives from employee affinity groups at State, friends of American diplomacy, students here at FSI, including some of our newest diplomats, and other members of the State Department community.

And it is a pleasure to be here at the Foreign Service Institute where generations of State Department personnel have trained and studied. Here, many of you have learned new languages, studied the politics, economics and histories of countries and regions where you



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serve, received management and leadership training, learned how to write reporting cables, issue visas, run assistance programs, and much, much more. This is where the future of American diplomacy is shaped.

And that's why this is a perfect place for today's conversation about the future of the State Department. Throughout its history, the State Department has been in a near-constant state of renewal. Through wars and conflicts, depressions and pandemics, democracy movements and tech revolutions, our institution has evolved: diplomats and development experts building new expertise, devising new policies, standing up new teams -- striving at all times to ensure that American diplomacy is serving our national interests in what is a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world.

And secretaries going back nearly 200 years have led reorganizations of the State Department. Of course, back in the day, things were a little bit simpler than they may be now. The first reorganization happened in 1833 under Secretary Louis McLane during the Andrew Jackson presidency. At the end of that process, State was larger than it had ever been -- seven whole bureaus. Apparently, Secretary McLane went too far because a year later, the next secretary, John Forsyth, dropped the department back down to four bureaus. There's actually a lesson there for us. Real reform isn't just moving boxes around an organization chart. It's not change for the sake of change. It's about making sure that our work, our resources, our priorities are all aligned with what's happening in the world, that we're dealing effectively with the most significant challenges before us and meeting the needs and aspirations of the people that we serve.

I committed on my first day in office to leave behind a State Department ready to meet the tests of the 21st century -- an even stronger, more effective, more agile, more diverse institution that can lead America's engagement in the world. And from the start, President Biden pledged to put diplomacy at the center of our foreign policy. He asked to increase the State and USAID budget by 10 percent, which will make it possible for the largest State



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Department hiring increase in a decade, nearly 500 new Foreign and Civil Service positions. So far, Congress has responded favorably to this request.

Over the past several months, we've listened to the career workforce. We've heard from the State Department's partners and advocates inside and outside of government, including in Congress, about what needs to be done to make sure that we're dealing effectively with the most significant challenges before us, and meeting the needs and aspirations of the American people. The diagnosis is, actually, widely shared and so are the remedies. We have a window before us to make historic, lasting change, and we're determined to seize it.

So today, I'm pleased to share with you our plan to modernize the purpose and institution of American diplomacy. Some of our proposals are already being implemented; others will be rolled out soon. And as I said on Monday when I met with our chiefs of mission around the world and with department leaders, at every step, we want to hear from our people about how we can most effectively do the things that I'll lay out today.

There are, as with any good plan, a few pillars -- five of them.

First, we will build our capacity and expertise in the areas that will be critical to our national security in the years ahead, particularly climate, global health, cyber security and emerging technologies, economics, and multilateral diplomacy. This isn't just a new list of priorities by a new administration. It reflects a significant reorientation of U.S. foreign policy that focuses on the forces that most directly and consequentially affect Americans' lives, livelihoods, and security, and that will increasingly be at the heart of our alliances and partnerships, and core to our engagement with strategic competitors.

On cyberspace and emerging technologies, we have a major stake in shaping the digital revolution that's happening around us and making sure that it serves our people, protects our interests, boosts our competitiveness, and upholds our values. We want to prevent cyber attacks that put our people, our networks, companies, and critical infrastructure at risk. We want the internet to remain a transformative force for learning, for connection, for economic



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growth, not a tool of repression. We want to shape the standards that govern new technology, so they ensure quality, protect consumer health and safety, facilitate trade, respect people's rights. We want to make sure the technology works for democracy, fighting back against disinformation, standing up for internet freedom, reducing the misuse of surveillance technology. And we want to promote cooperation, advancing this agenda tech by tech, issue by issue, with democratic partners by our side.

All of this is work for American diplomacy. After an intense review led by Deputy Secretary Sherman and McKeon that included consultations with partners in Congress and outside experts, I intend, with the support of Congress, to establish a new bureau for cyberspace and digital policy headed by an ambassador-at-large, and to name a new special envoy for critical and emerging technology. Both will report to Deputy Secretary Sherman for at least the first year.

We will also bring more specialized talent, including STEM expertise, to the department, and ensure that we're developing expertise as well in these areas across the Foreign and Civil Service. By taking these steps, we'll be better able to make sure that the United States remains the world's innovation leader and standard setter.

On global health security, we're conducting a review to determine how the department can best lead on this issue. Stay tuned for the results there. It's critical that we not only help end the COVID-19 pandemic, but also build back better global health security to prevent, to detect, and mitigate future pandemics. After the ordeal of the past 21 months, this is an opportunity and a responsibility that we must, and we will, seize.

On climate, President Biden created the position of special presidential envoy for climate, and Secretary Kerry and his team are hard at work integrating climate diplomacy across the department. We've created new Foreign Service positions dedicated full time to climate issues, one in every regional bureau and in critical posts overseas, for example, in India and Brazil. And we'll seek new funding to educate and train officers worldwide on climate diplomacy.



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Multilateral diplomacy -- well, that's diplo-speak for the need to cooperate with other countries to contend with the greatest challenges of our time, none of which we can tackle effectively alone. If we're not engaged in international institutions, then we leave a void likely to be filled by others who may not share our values and interests, or no one steps up and we squander the benefits of collective action. And wherever and whenever new rules are being debated, for example, on how the global economy should work, how the internet should be governed, how our environment should be protected, how human rights should be defined and defended, American diplomats need to be at the table.

So, we're ramping up our expertise, our skills, and our training. And we've created a new office within the International Organizations Bureau with a single mandate to ensure that we and our closest partners can win elections to lead key institutions, be appointed to key bodies, serve in key positions across the United Nations, and push back against those looking to undermine the integrity of the international system that we help to build, to shape, and to lead.

In a more competitive global economy, we'll continue to invest in economic expertise, in the Civil and Foreign Service. And we're substantially increasing the number of economic officers posted around the world to promote American exports and businesses, to advocate for a level playing field, and help shape the new global economy in ways that strengthen the American middle class.

Second, we will elevate new voices and encourage more initiative and more innovation. We're launching a new policy ideas channel. Employees at any level anywhere in the world will be able to share their policy ideas directly with department leaders. We know they have fresh and creative thinking. We value their perspectives. And we believe that good ideas are good ideas wherever they come from. So, let's make it easier for your good ideas to be heard by people making the decisions.



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I've also revitalized the dissent channel, because dissent is patriotic. And it shouldn't just be protected. It should be and it will be welcomed. I'm reading and responding to every dissent that comes through the channel. And I hope the dissent channel will encourage a culture of constructive, professional dissent, more broadly throughout the department, because dissent makes us stronger.

We also want to hear more from the American people. Our mission is to deliver for them and all those who have an equity in the work that we do. Too often our communication is a one-way street. We talk and we hope they listen. We've got to do more listening. And that's not just the right thing to do. It's the necessary thing to do. Because if key stakeholders aren't with us on the takeoff, they're less likely to stick with us on the landing. We need their ideas, and we need their buy-in.

So, I'll be asking all senior officials to make domestic travel and engagement a greater priority, and that includes senior leaders at posts who can engage virtually. We're going to reach out much more regularly to civil society groups, private companies, state and local governments, community organizations, universities, and we'll make sure that we're connecting with people from different parts of the country -- urban and rural -- because our mission isn't to serve some Americans, but all Americans. We're diplomats, and we're going to focus more of our diplomacy here at home to make sure our policies reflect the needs, the aspirations, the values of the American people.

Third, we will build and retain a diverse, dynamic, and entrepreneurial workforce, and we'll equip and empower our employees to succeed. Our diversity as a nation in backgrounds and experiences, in race, religion, ethnicity, in countries of origin, is among our greatest competitive advantages in the world. Failing to draw on that diversity shortchanges our foreign policy and our ability to advance our interests in the world.

I'm determined that we win the competition for talent, and that competition has grown fierce in recent decades. Now, there was a time when if you wanted to work, travel abroad, live a global life, build a rewarding and challenging career, well, the State Department was the place



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to be, maybe the only place to be. But in today's economy, in today's world, someone looking for that kind of life and work has a lot more options.

So, we need to step up our game too. We need to do more on diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and equity so that talented people from all walks of life see the State Department as a place where they can belong and they can thrive. We need to empower employees and create more opportunities for advancement so mid-career professionals don't have to make painful choices about whether to stay or leave. And the life of being in the Foreign Service of the Civil Service comes with unique challenges, which we can do more to solve.

We're taking steps on all these fronts. Earlier this year, I appointed the State Department's first chief diversity and inclusion officer. Ambassador Abercrombie-Winstanley and her team will soon release their preliminary strategic plan to be finalized early next year to ensure that the State Department truly reflects the people that we represent.

We're already implementing important steps, such as establishing a demographic baseline against which future progress can be measured, improving transparency for the Foreign Service bidding process, and securing funding for paid internships so you don't have to come from a well-off family to afford the opportunity.

We've also conducted a review of assignment restrictions. As you know, these can prevent employees from certain backgrounds from getting certain assignments. Critics have said it's discriminatory. We heard that concern. We launched a careful review. Today I can announce that we've been able to lift more than half of these restrictions, opening up new possible assignments for hundreds of our people. And we're planning to revise the appeals process for anyone who feels they've been restricted unfairly.

Secretary Powell had a vision for what the military calls a training float -- a set number of employees who are getting professional training at any given time, without sacrificing our readiness. Now, we will make that happen. We're working to add more positions to the



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training float in the current budget, and we'll push to increase those numbers even more in the coming years.

We want both the Foreign and Civil Service to have more opportunities for professional development throughout your careers, including exchanges and rotations in other government agencies, the private sector, Congress. Your chances to learn and grow as State Department professionals should and will be ongoing.

Our Civil Service represents some of the State Department's deepest policy and management expertise. We've secured a 10 percent increase in the number of Senior Executive Service positions. That is the first significant increase in our SES positions in more than a decade. And more broadly, we're working to address the issues that we know can make it challenging to serve. No one at the State Department expects their jobs to be easy; that's not why we're here. But many have asked whether it has to be quite this hard. It can be challenging and stressful for family members to find jobs, and maintain their own careers. Hardship posts and unaccompanied posts can take a real toll. The promotion pipeline has narrowed, and too many of our employees face tougher obstacles overseas because of their race, gender, because they're LGBTQI, or have a disability.

I take all these issues very seriously. And I know that we can do even more to address them to ensure that choosing a career with the State Department is not only meaningful and rewarding, but sustainable and family-friendly as well.

We'll be institutionalizing some of the changes and flexibilities we've adopted during COVID, like telework, and the Global Talent Management Bureau is creating what we're calling a retention unit to better understand and address the issues that may be causing people to consider leaving. We've got to do better on keeping, empowering, supporting the incredible talent and expertise that we already have in this community. If we don't, so much else that we're doing on recruitment and hiring will fall short.



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The fourth pillar is modernizing our tech, our comms, our analytical capabilities. The United States is the most technologically advanced country on Earth. The State Department should be empowered by that strength. I'm seeking a significant increase in our IT budget. We're asking for 50 percent more. You need better tools to do your jobs flexibly, efficiently, securely, from Washington and from the field. And accessibility must be built into our tech infrastructure from the ground up. We also want to go much further in using technology, innovation, and data to solve foreign policy challenges. We unveiled the State Department's first-ever enterprise data strategy last month. If you haven't had a chance to check it out, please, do so. The department has vast and diverse data sets, but we haven't done a good enough job making data available to you in a timely and useful way, to help you make missions or management decisions more effectively. We're changing that. We also haven't always done a good job capturing lessons from our work. A learning institution is a strong institution -- open to new insights, new information, new ways of working.

I want to take a moment here to talk about a major example of where it's absolutely critical that we capture and benefit from lessons learned, and that's Afghanistan. Many of you and your colleagues around the world worked with great intensity to help bring to safety more than 120,000 American citizens, foreign partners, Afghans at risk. It's a remarkable achievement and a testament not only to your commitment and ingenuity, but also your deep sense of mission toward Afghanistan. That said, the operation was also incredibly difficult, and there are many things that now, looking back, we can and should ask. Could we have done things differently? Could we have taken that step differently? Should we have tried that idea first? Could we have gotten to that decision more quickly? We learned a lot in a short period of time. We learned it the hard way. We learned by doing.

Now we owe it to ourselves, to our Afghan friends and partners, to the future State Department employees who might find themselves facing a similar challenge one day to capture all that we learned, to study it, to apply it, to preserve it in a way that it enhances our future planning and helps us prepare better for future contingencies.



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I've ordered a series of internal reviews focused on our planning and execution for the evacuation and relocation effort in Afghanistan. We will not let this opportunity to learn and do better pass us by.

The fifth and final pillar of our plan is to reinvigorate the in-person diplomacy and public engagement that's essential to advance U.S. national interests. Because for all the benefits of technologies like Zoom, there's no substitute for face-to-face engagement. And there's no one more courageous, more intrepid, more enterprising than the U.S. Foreign Service, especially when it comes to public engagement, which is such a vital piece of our diplomacy.

The past few years we've seen again how being an American diplomat comes with risk. Our people have conducted the evacuation and relocation operation in Afghanistan under perilous conditions. Our embassy teams around the world are still facing a dangerous pandemic. Too many of our people have been affected by the anomalous health incidents that we continue to investigate.

I've met with colleagues around the world who've been struck by these health incidents. I'm deeply moved by what they've been through. We will not spare any effort to protect our people, to make sure they have access to the best care, and we will leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of what and who is behind these incidents. And I'll have more to say about that in the next day. These incidents remind us that being a diplomat can be dangerous, and we must do everything we can to keep our people and their families safe.

Having said that, we've also heard from many diplomats around the world how it's harder than it needs to be for them to do the kind of on-the-ground, person-to-person diplomacy that is so essential. For example, new embassies are often built far from central areas and with intense security measures, which makes it hard for our diplomats simply to schedule meetings off campus. It can take months, even years to open new missions -- something we used to do much more quickly. And moving our people into new places -- even low-risk places -- often comes with security regulations that slow us down considerably.



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Meanwhile, other countries are increasing their diplomatic presence worldwide with far greater ease. We can keep our people and their families safe, while also standing up new locations overseas quickly to respond to changing events, and while engaging more outside embassy walls and extending our reach to cities, communities, commercial centers beyond national capitals.

A world of zero risk is not a world in which American diplomacy can deliver. We have to accept risk, and manage it smartly. And in this, as in other areas, we will work closely with Congress to ensure that we have the authorities and policies in place to support our people.

So, what I hope has come through here is that none of these changes are reform for the sake of reform. They're all tied directly to the mission in front of us, the goals that we set for ourselves, the fundamental strength and health of this institution that we love. We need to put the State Department in the best possible position to confront the challenges facing our country, and we need to build, support, and protect the workforce that makes everything that we do possible.

The people of State Department are dedicated, talented public servants who work miracles every day on behalf of the American people. We designed this plan with them in mind, because they're our greatest asset; they deserve our best.

We recently lost two giants of American diplomacy: George Shultz, for whom this National Foreign Affairs Training Center is named; and Colin Powell -- two men who loved and respected the State Department and its people. The women and men of the State Department felt the same way about them.

Reflecting on their legacies, it drove home for me how all of us, at every level, are part of the State Department for only a short time. And in the time that we have here, it's our privilege to do all we can to leave this department stronger than we found it so that when we pass the baton to those who follow, they can grab it and run even further ahead.



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I take that responsibility very seriously. I know that you do, too. That's what this modernization plan is all about. And I'm looking forward to carrying it out in partnership with each and every one of you.

Thanks very much.