

**Testimony Summary of Fiona M. Alexander, American University
House, Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Securing U.S. Leadership of Communications Technology, March 18, 2026**

Context

- The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the UN specialized agency for ICTs (standards, spectrum, and development). Its treaty outcomes materially affect U.S. national, economic, and security interests. The November 2026 Plenipotentiary is the pivotal event this year and its outcomes will impact U.S. success at WRC 2027.

Priority Goals for the United States

- Win elections and secure leadership influence (support Secretary-General Doreen Bogdan-Martin, win ITU Council and Radio Regulations Board roles).
- Prevent harmful treaty changes that broaden ITU authority over Internet or AI governance.

Top Risks

- A failed Plenipotentiary weakens U.S. influence at WRC 2027.
- Expanding the ITU remit or convening a WCIT could produce adverse global regulation of the Internet, cybersecurity, or AI.

Recommended Immediate Actions

- **Senate to Confirm** the Ambassador-at-Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy nominee Adam Cassidy swiftly so senior leadership can articulate clear policy goals.
- **Ensure adequate staffing and resources** across agencies for both the Plenipotentiary Conference and WRC; *revisit* U.S. self-imposed limits on delegation size and contractor participation to enable “all-hands-on-deck.”
- **Establish an early, robust interagency decision process** with meaningful industry and stakeholder input to resolve domestic tradeoffs before the meeting.
- **Invest in coalition-building** (CITEL, OECD, and other allies/issue-specific partners) and pragmatic delegation leadership prepared to negotiate package tradeoffs and whip votes on the ground.

Impact: These steps are essential to win elections, shape treaty outcomes, and protect U.S. innovation and national and economic security interests at the ITU.

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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of securing U.S. Leadership of Communications Technology at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). While I am currently affiliated with American University, I previously had the privilege of working at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for nearly twenty years, across four (4) Presidential Administrations. At NTIA I led the Office of International Affairs which is the part of NTIA that, among other things, is responsible for developing and advancing U.S. positions on telecommunications and ICT policy and standards at various international fora.

During my time at NTIA, I routinely spent a full third, if not more, of every calendar year at countless meetings of ITU Study Groups, ITU Council, and ITU conferences – both treaty

making and administrative - or preparing for them. This included the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022.

What I have learned from my extensive experience at the ITU is that the United States of America succeeds in that venue when:

- 1) a clear set of policy goals is articulated and understood;
- 2) a robust process of early interagency decision-making, involving US industry and other stakeholders, is established;
- 3) meaningful and sustained effort is put into building and maintaining strong coalitions with allies and partners; and,
- 4) the delegation leadership is pragmatic in positioning the U.S. at the meeting as any final agreement involves tradeoffs and compromises.

What is the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

The ITU is the specialized United Nations agency for information and communications technologies (ICTs). Established in 1865 to coordinate telegraph signals with the moniker International Telegraph Union, it was integrated into the broader UN system in 1949. Over its 160-year existence, the ITU's work and remit have evolved to match technology

innovations. Where there was a need for international connectivity or coordination in communications networks, governments and industry, typically turned to the ITU.

The ITU is comprised of 194 countries, called Member States, and more than 1000 companies, universities and international and regional organizations, called Sector Members. Structurally it has three (3) different divisions referred to as “sectors” or “bureaus”.

The ITU Standardization Sector or ITU-T which develops international technical standards, known as ITU-T Recommendations, to ensure global interconnection and interoperability of information and communication technology (ICT) networks and services.

The ITU Radiocommunications Sector or ITU-R which manages the table of international radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits, ensuring interference-free, efficient, and equitable use of wireless services worldwide.

And the ITU Development Sector or ITU-D which works to close the digital divide and foster international cooperation to achieve sustainable digital development, particularly in least-developed countries.

In most instances, the same government agencies and even individual staff experts represent their country across all three Sectors. Through bottom-up, membership driven

processes the ITU allocates global radio spectrum and satellite orbits, develops the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies connect seamlessly, and works to improve access to digital technologies in underserved communities worldwide. Operating in the background, the ITU is one of the organizations setting international standards that facilitate global trade and technology adoption.

The ITU is managed on a day-to-day basis by 5 independently elected officials. A Secretary-General, a Deputy Secretary-General, and then a Director for each of the three bureaus (i.e., Standards, Radio, Development). Governments provide oversight through a 48 elected member group called the ITU Council, which typically meets annually. Unlike the broader UN system where government fees or contributions are assessed based on Gross National Income, ITU members self-select how much money to give to the ITU. The United States is currently the largest contributor to the ITU budget which with today's currency conversion rates is roughly \$14 million a year.

While this all might sound bureaucratic and wonky, the decisions made and agreements brokered in the various ITU working groups and treaties impact the daily life of every American.

Imagine your typical Congressional session week. You use the in-flight Wi-Fi to stay connected; your staff sends you updates on your schedule and votes; constituents contact your office for assistance; you do a live nationwide TV interview; and you get in your car and

rely on the navigation system to get you safely to your evening's events. None of this happens without the global work done at the ITU.

Making the ITU paradoxically the most important organization most people have never heard of, and an institution critical to the national and economic security of the United States.

An intergovernmental setting with familiar working methods

The ITU is unique in the UN system in that its government members negotiate, in routine intervals, three (3) distinct treaties.

The first, the ITU Constitution and Convention has revisions considered every 4 years at the Plenipotentiary Conference. This foundational treaty establishes the mandate and scope of the ITU and its core work methods.

The second treaty is the Radio Regulations. This treaty manages the global radio-frequency spectrum and geostationary satellite orbits and defines technical standards for new communication technologies. It is renegotiated every 3-4 years at the World Radio Conference (WRC).

The third is the International Telecom Regulations (ITRs) which was established in 1988 by merging old telegraph and telephony rules. The ITRs set high-level principles for the provision and operation of global telecommunication services and are updated at a World Conference on International Telecommunication (WCIT) — a treaty conference that is not regularly scheduled, but rather is convened at the call of the Union. While these happen less frequently, the last being in 2012 when the US and 54 other countries refused to sign the proposed update citing concerns of Internet regulation and control, there is a routine push by countries like Russia for another WCIT.

Historically the results of these treaty conferences have been sent to Congress as part of the advice and consent process, which makes hearings like this critically important.

While each treaty meeting is an independent multi-week event, the preparations for each meeting begin years in advance. In a one country, one vote system where voting is discouraged, preferring to operate by consensus, success requires building coalitions. For the United States, this starts with working in the Inter-American Telecommunication Commission or CITELE to get regional support for US positions and proposals. CITELE, part of the Organization of American States (OAS), is made up of 35 countries from the Americas region and submits consensus-driven Inter-American Proposals or IAPs to all ITU treaty conferences. CITELE regional positions can be hard fought but once taken into the ITU typically hold firm. Beyond CITELE, the United States also looks for support from other key

partners and allies in Europe and Asia and often initiates or joins “multi-country proposals” to ensure the broadest possible support for its objectives.

As an example, preparations for the 2012 WCIT began in an ITU working group created 3 years prior (2009). The United States actively participated in the many meetings of the working group and worked within CITELE to build opposition to proposals emanating from more authoritarian regimes that would have the ITU regulate the Internet through the ITRs. Recognizing, however, the full scope of the challenge, the United States also built a strong coalition of democratically minded allies and friends through a separate process at the OECD (i.e., OECD’s Internet Policymaking Principles). As the treaty conference hit the anticipated contentious breaking point, the United States was able to leverage the CITELE and OECD work and have senior leaders at the White House make phone calls to the decision makers in world capitals to ensure that when United States stood up and voted no, so did 54 other countries.

The need to establish core positions, plans, build coalitions in traditional and non-traditional channels, and whip votes, must sound familiar. It is what I imagine are all the steps necessary in Congress to legislate. The words used to describe things might be different – CITELE or OECD versus a committee, subcommittee, or caucus; core positions and meeting contributions versus legislative priorities, draft bills, and amendments – but the ITU at a conceptual level works similarly, if not the same as Congress.

What's at stake this cycle

Every calendar year there are countless ITU working group meetings, at least one Council meeting, and a major conference or treaty negotiation. In other words, the ITU is always in session. And while the topics being addressed at each gathering may be distinct, the outcome from one meeting naturally impacts the next. It is typically the same people entering each room, so building trust with partners and working collegially, even when you disagree, is key. A country that may not be on your side in one issue or meeting, can easily become an ally and indispensable partner in another meeting. Transactional diplomacy from capitals does not carry the day in a room of technical experts that engage regularly.

For 2026, the main event is the November ITU Plenipotentiary. Debates about broadening the scope of the ITU mandate are sure to occur as some governments look to have the ITU have more of a role in Artificial Intelligence – be it standards or governance – and there will be a decision made on whether and when to convene the next WCIT. The elections will be a top priority for the United States. Not only is the U.S. running for a seat on the ITU Council and a candidate for the Radio Regulations Board, but the Trump Administration has also announced it is supporting American Doreen Bogdan-Martin for a second 4-year term as ITU Secretary-General.

Leadership at the top of the ITU has been a recent bipartisan effort with Doreen's election first as Director of the Development Sector, her first term as Secretary General, and now

her second term campaign, being a strong through line connecting the first Trump Administration, the Biden Administration, and now the second Trump term.

A former NTIA staff person, Doreen is the first woman to ever lead the ITU. In her first term, she focused on making the ITU more transparent and impact driven. As Secretary-General she has mobilized billions of dollars in connectivity commitments that are propelling economic growth and investment and has spearheaded critical institutional reforms at the ITU. To strengthen governance and accountability, she established an Oversight unit and an Ombudsman function and restored timely external audits to reinforce transparency and institutional credibility. Given the criticality of the ITU to the United States' communications agenda, a well-functioning ITU, one led by someone who shares our core values is paramount.

With elections outcomes at the ITU decided by literally counting paper ballots, winning takes work and a whole of government approach. Clear ballot boxes are transported from Geneva to whatever city is the host specifically for election voting. Countries are called up one, by one, in French alphabetical order to drop their folded pieces of paper into the box. The only person that knows how a country voted is the actual individual checking the box, folding the paper, and dropping it in those special boxes from Geneva.

Successful campaigns require asking all countries, at every possible opportunity for their support. Asks are made of traditional telecom agencies and foreign affairs departments,

but also defense agencies and from Presidential offices. You must engage in national capitals around the world, but also all the embassies here in Washington, DC. And then given the paper ballot, person-in-the-room dynamic, you must whip votes at the actual meeting.

One of my proudest moments in government was when Doreen was the first ever woman elected to an ITU leadership position in 2018. I am pretty sure as I looked down the rows of our 100+ delegation there wasn't a dry eye to be found. It only took 153 years and the principals from the key agencies – NTIA, State, and FCC – to work as a team. David Redl, Ajit Pai, and Rob Strayer for that cycle, set aside agency differences, aligned on a common goal, divided up the world and went to work. That is what it takes for the U.S. to win at the ITU.

While many seem to have their eyes focused on the 2027 WRC given its importance to spectrum and space issues, it is important not to lose sight of this year's meeting in November. One of the biggest risks to the United States achieving success at WRC next year is an unsuccessful Plenipotentiary this year. And a bad decision to convene a WCIT and update the ITRs will open a Pandora's box of potential bad global regulation of the Internet, cybersecurity, and Artificial Intelligence. That would be a bad outcome for America and innovation.

Action Needed

For the United States to be successful at the ITU and secure U.S. leadership of communications technology, it is important that everyone appreciate this is an ongoing and continuous process – the ITU is always in session. What happens at one meeting impacts the next. We cannot expect to be successful at WRC 2027 if we are not successful this year at the Plenipotentiary. And key to both meetings is strong, committed political leadership. It is great to see that Trump Administration has nominated current NTIA Deputy Assistant Secretary Adam Cassady to be Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy. A swift confirmation so he can assume this role is needed so that a clear set of policy goals is articulated and understood by all.

Next, the appropriate and necessary staff resources across the relevant U.S. government agencies needs to be secured. While there are many capable career staff, all agencies have lost some key personnel with retirements and downsizing. Historically the United States has placed self-imposed constraints on itself by limiting the role of contractors and lobbyists on delegations. No other country does this and if the United States is to truly adopt an all-hands-on deck mentality, these restrictions should be revisited. There have also over the years been efforts to limit the size of the U.S. delegations. Again, these are self-imposed and limiting the size of our delegation limits our ability to be effective. No other country does this; in fact our adversaries are only increasing the number of people they send.

Positions that the United States advances at the ITU are almost always the result of domestic tradeoffs. To make sure the delegation goes into the meeting with the strongest possible position, a robust and fulsome interagency process needs to be established early so that thoughtful choices can be made and elevated to senior levels when and as needed to adjudicate disputes. This process needs to have meaningful input from US industry and other stakeholders. When the U.S. delegation shows up on the ground, parochial agency and industry concerns must be set aside. It is all one team. Team USA.

A vote of one does not win at the ITU, just like it does not win in Congress. Transactional diplomacy from capitals does not carry the day in a room of technical experts that engage regularly. Meaningful and sustained effort needs to be put into building and maintaining strong coalitions with allies and partners. CITELE is an important venue, but issue specific allies can often be found in the most surprising places if effort and engagement is made. Similarly, the delegation leadership needs to adopt a pragmatic approach in positioning the U.S. as any final agreement involves tradeoffs and compromises. There is always a “package” deal to be made. The same as legislating — nothing is final until everything is final and you want to be in the game until the end. Just saying no to certain historical phrases or concepts takes you out of the conversation and results in being left behind as the meeting moves forward without you.

Conclusion

Thank you again Chairman Hudson and Ranking Member Matsui for the opportunity to testify today on this important issue. Success at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is paramount to securing U.S. leadership of communications technology. And hearings like today help to raise the profile of a workstream that can often be overlooked. Congressional engagement tells the world that there is strong and unified support from all quarters of the United States government for wins across the ITU.

I will be happy to answer any questions.