

Securing U.S. Leadership of Communications Technology

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce

Subcommittee on Communications and Technology

Testimony by

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Thank you, Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the subcommittee. I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to share my perspectives on this important topic — Securing U.S. Leadership of Communications Technology. I had the honor of leading our delegation to the 2023 World Radiocommunication Conference in Dubai while I served as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy. I recently retired from the State Department after a 30-year career serving under five Presidents and currently work as a senior advisor with Crest Hill Advisors LLC. Today, I am testifying on my own behalf based on my experience leading the WRC-23 delegation and working as a Foreign Service officer and not on behalf of any clients of Crest Hill Advisors.

The World Radiocommunication Conference may be the most consequential international negotiation that most people have never heard of. The conference takes place under the auspices of the International Telecommunication Union, or ITU, usually at four-year intervals. At the WRC, ITU members negotiate updates to the international Radio Regulations, a treaty-level instrument that allocates and harmonizes radiofrequency spectrum to enable new services, prevent interference, and promote interoperability. As you know, spectrum is a finite resource, and with the rapid advancement of ever more data-intensive technologies and the accelerating growth of mobile and wireless devices it is increasingly precious to a growing number of industries, government agencies, scientists, and consumers.

Radiofrequency spectrum harmonization through the WRC has allowed industries ranging from mobile phones to Wi-Fi to achieve global economies of scale driving billions in investment. It ensures militaries that their radar and other systems can operate reliably and without interference. It enables our devices to connect to local networks when we travel. It makes sure that aircraft and ships have continuous communications and functioning navigation wherever they go. And increasingly, the WRC and its work are critical to unlocking the space economy, from new satellite technologies to a human presence on the Moon.

Like other multilateral bodies, the ITU and WRC are flawed. The bureaucracy has grown bloated over the years; politics occasionally bleeds into technical conversations; and adversaries, like Iran and Cuba, have equal seats at the table. But there is no other mechanism that can realistically open global markets to wireless services on the ground, at sea, in the air, and in space. Private companies can join the ITU as sector members and participate in the WRC, an unusual feature for a UN organization that has worked to the advantage of the United States.

The stakes are high at the ITU. China is aggressively promoting its approach to digital technology around the world — an approach that uses technology to restrict speech, control assembly, and repress dissent. China's technological advancement is a direct threat, not only to our national security and economic prosperity, but also to our democratic values. It has targeted the ITU as a venue for expanding its global technology reach.

That's why it was a significant blow to U.S. interests when the ITU Council, the organization's governing body, voted to accept China's offer to host WRC-27 in Shanghai, despite the aggressive U.S.-led diplomat campaign to prevent such an outcome. A Chinese official will now be the presumptive chair of the conference, and information security for the delegations attending will be a serious concern.

But these potential obstacles must not deter us. They should drive the United States to recommit to winning at the WRC. China's offer to host in the first place was motivated by the successful U.S. effort in 2022 to replace the Chinese Secretary General of the ITU with Doreen Bogdan Martin, a uniquely qualified American citizen and former Department of Commerce official. Offering to host the WRC was an attempt by China to reassert its influence.

These challenges are not insurmountable. With advanced preparation and planning, effective leadership, and a high-level commitment to success, the United States can achieve all of its objectives at WRC-27.

I believe there are four critical steps that the U.S. government must take to win:

1. **Keep the Pressure on China:** China won the vote to host by a narrow margin with only 25 votes of the 48 ITU Council members, and its legitimacy as host is already in question. We must continue to hold China accountable and urge likeminded partners to do the same. We can do this directly with Chinese leadership in bilateral conversations while urging the ITU to do the same in its negotiation of the host-country agreement with Beijing. This should include demanding mitigating measures to address information security concerns as well as securing commitments to impartial management of the conference. We must then work with partners to make sure China fulfills those commitments before and during the conference.
2. **Accelerate U.S. Preparations:** The WRC process continues throughout the four years between conferences. The U.S. delegation in the past has too often been disadvantaged by delays in developing U.S. positions through complicated internal negotiations. Senior leadership of U.S. agencies, including the Federal Communications Commission and the Departments of Commerce, Defense, and State, needs to commit, with White House support, to developing U.S. positions as quickly as possible. Industry should cooperate in this effort. Even when positions are not fully finalized, identifying top priority issues early in order to be able to begin engagement with our foreign partners will be essential.
3. **Build Coalitions Early:** We cannot win this contest without friends and allies who share our priorities and are committed to standing up to opposition. The earlier we start

building coalitions through persistent, high-level diplomatic engagement, the more successful we will be. This includes locking in support from our most closely aligned partners while also working hard to win over as many middle ground countries as possible. We must think creatively as well and explore new ideas for engagement. This could include a U.S.-hosted spectrum summit to build support among allies and countries on the fence in the months ahead of the conference.

4. **Identify Leadership Now and Build the Right Team:** I understand that the administration has been working hard to identify the right person to lead our delegation to WRC-27, and I hope we'll see a formal announcement soon. The sooner that happens the better. It will also be essential to make sure that he or she has the right team in place that is fully funded to engage diplomatically on a global basis. The conference is a complicated and sprawling event with multiple committee and working party meetings taking place simultaneously. It will be critical to have an adequately sized U.S. government contingent with the right skill sets at the conference to cover all of these competing events.

The ITU is far from perfect, and the WRC process can be frustrating and difficult. However, the United States has achieved much in reshaping the institution through Bogdan Martin's leadership and our own persistent and strategic engagement to make it fit for purpose and a venue where the United States can win. Now is the time to double down. With a high-level commitment to action now, the United States can emerge from WRC-27 stronger and more competitive in the global tech race.