Incredibly heartening is the news that at the close of this decade, the State Department’s top leadership is once again taking a serious look at the role of information technology in the mission of diplomacy. But the challenges will be very different than 10 years ago, when making the department a “wired” organization involved the deployment of digital infrastructure — mostly computer and networking hardware. The new thrust of digitized diplomacy will primarily involve software, which will likely stand at odds with State’s current processes and culture.

New applications and structures are now changing the face of IT. Cloud and mobile computing, browser-based applications, weblogs and social media will change the way almost all information workers (including diplomats) do their jobs, and may challenge the method by which the entire department functions.

State is now connected, but must take stock and determine the best avenues for building on the digital foundation constructed nearly a decade ago. The most significant change in diplomacy since the advent of the telegram is at hand.

**Opening the Net**

Wiring State was a project given highest priority by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who doggedly pursued the goal of getting Internet computers on the desktop of each employee and deploying OpenNet Plus, not only inside the Harry S Truman Building but also in the hundreds of missions around the globe. Admirably, the project was completed in roughly 18 months and deepened linkages between Main State and overseas posts, as well as digitally connecting the department to the world.

Fernando Burbano, State’s first chief information officer, prepared the foundation for what the late USIA-hand Wilson Dizard Jr. had begun to illuminate in his *Meganet* (Westview Press, 1998) and fleshed out in *Digital Diplomacy — U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age* (Praeger, 2001). As Dizard opined, “Digital diplomacy issues and techniques have had to be shoehorned into a policymaking system run by officials who were initially uninterested in and often suspicious of the subject.” Nonetheless, Sec. Powell recognized that foreign affairs would have to go digital, and ordered that the infrastructure for making that transition be constructed at breakneck speed. Thanks to this executive interest, Burbano got the Internet onto the department’s desktops, and did it quickly.

State is now in a position to build novel applications to support the mission of diplomacy. It does so in interesting times. After a few years of post–Internet bubble reflection, the pace of change and development in the IT sector is once again surging. While some technologies will fall into what IT consultancy Gartner, Inc., labels “the trough of disillusionment,” many will thrive, becoming de facto standards for organizational communications and productivity. The department will need to make wise bets on what standards it can accept and which ones it should ignore.

In doing so, its leadership must stay focused on the information piece of IT, adopting technologies that more effectively accommodate the complexity of international affairs and man-
The most significant change in diplomacy since the advent of the telegram is likely at hand.

An organization can spend all the money in the world on hardware, but without ideas on how to adopt and harness game-changing technologies to distill a more useful information picture or manage relationships, that investment will produce scant returns.
As a key component of the nation’s “soft power,” diplomacy will need to harness the potential of big “I” technologies if Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s vision of “smart power” is to be realized. We know there is no reason for U.S. diplomats not to be the best-informed on the planet. The challenge is in finding new applications, ways of working and skill sets to do that. For the department, the information resources available must not only facilitate communication, but intense and rapid learning.

**Getting the Size Right**

In computing, government has been present from the beginning. In 1946, the same year that Kennan transmitted his famous “Long Telegram,” the University of Pennsylvania built ENIAC, the world’s first true digital computer, for the United States Army. For every large mainframe that IBM or the Digital Equipment Corp. designed, Uncle Sam could be counted on as a major customer. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the U.S. government bought big systems, usually composed of large computing cores connected to large numbers of “dumb” terminals.

State was no different than the Department of Defense or the Federal Aviation Administration in seeing merit in automation. It rolled out the Foreign Affairs Information Management Effort, the first of many information management plans, in 1964. FAIME was an interagency effort, aimed at modernizing “the flow and handling of information within and among the Department of State, the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Agency, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.” Though well intended, it died quietly a few years later.

After significant investment in Wang hardware and software, the department eventually made its way to the same
While State has made significant strides in the adoption of IT to perform the mission of diplomacy, they are modest in comparison with the investment the Pentagon has made in applying information technology to its missions under the “Revolution in Military Affairs” banner. An IT-driven overhaul of diplomacy will require still greater investment, outreach and acceptance of culture change.

On that last point, the stark reality remains that the transition at State from a Cold War posture to one able to cope with the multilayered contemporary international system is incomplete. The department will need to look more closely at multilateral diplomacy and the value of “internestic” relations, where allegiance to country is on a relatively low rung.

To tackle this, a bulking-up of the department’s big “I,” little “t” components is needed. A revitalized information skunkworks built on the model of IRM’s Office of eDiplomacy — preferably reporting high up the administrative chain, perhaps directly to the Deputy Secretary of State — would send an important message on efforts to infuse innovation into the practice of diplomacy. In addition, the department’s CIO needs to become a true chief, not just the person at the helm of IRM.

Finally, career tracks that reward IT-savvy generalists and recruitment efforts designed to draw more technical and engineering graduates into the the department ought to be considered.

Tempering any vision for IT at State, we must recognize that science and technology have a somewhat tarnished history there. James E. Webb,
who served as under secretary of State under Dean Acheson, devoted considerable effort to allocating additional resources to science and technology in diplomacy. But those pursuits took a back seat to the Cold War. Outmaneuvered by Paul Nitze, Webb abandoned this work and stepped down, eventually becoming President John F. Kennedy’s pick to lead NASA through the run-up to the Apollo moon landings.

Now we are again at a pivotal point for diplomacy. The leaders of State and Defense recognize that soft power, engagement and options other than force are all vital to the U.S. position in the world. Sec. Clinton is not only firmly engaged in the business of diplomacy but attentive to the needs of the department. She has, in the words of David Rothkopf, “defined a role for herself in the Obamaverse: often bad cop to his good cop, spine stiffener when it comes to tough adversaries and nurturer of new strategies.”

The department’s IT leaders should do everything possible to see that advances in State’s digital domain get a prominent place under the “new strategies” heading.

To meet its most important strategic goals — on global warming, the continuing economic crisis, nonproliferation and a host of regional issues — the department will require a practical, pragmatic digital strategy of the sort that Barack Obama employed to win the presidency.

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