

# **New Special Envoys**

## **Harnessing the Power of the American Business Community for U.S. Diplomacy**

**Jonathan Jeffrey and Max Neuberger**

This past June, American business magnate and Microsoft founder Bill Gates traveled to China for the first time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. China rolled out the red carpet. During his visit, Gates met with top Chinese officials and local partners of his foundation. He was even received by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who sat side-by-side with Gates and warmly welcomed him as “an old friend” and “the first American friend I’ve seen this year.”<sup>1</sup>

Just days later, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Beijing as the first Biden administration cabinet official to travel to China, the treatment was noticeably different. While Xi, after much speculation, granted Blinken an audience, their meeting occurred at an atypical U-shaped table. Only Xi was at the head, with Blinken seated off to the side.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in late October, American executives, including BlackRock's Larry Fink, JPMorgan's Jamie Dimon, Blackstone's Stephen Schwarzman, and Goldman Sachs's David Solomon, appeared on stage together at the Future Investment Initiative's annual conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> The conversation at the gathering, colloquially known as “Davos in the Desert,” was the marquee event of the three-day conference, which notably did not feature any current U.S. government officials. U.S. economic policy, however, was not absent from the conversation as executives were quizzed on recent U.S. monetary maneuvers, and Dimon even waded into foreign policy as he encouraged Saudi Arabia to continue establishing ties with Israel.

American CEOs and executives have influence, power, and goodwill that frequently surpasses the U.S. government. Around the world, the companies and industries that power American culture and economic vibrancy are revered—oftentimes more than the U.S. government. In fact, a 2021 Pew Survey found that, while U.S. favorability increased from 34 percent to 63 percent after the inauguration of Joe Biden, the same foreign respondents provided even higher favorability ratings for American technology, entertainment, and media.<sup>4</sup>

This presents an opportunity that the U.S. State Department can and should leverage. In order to better advance American interests abroad, the U.S. government should establish a new corps of American Special Envoys, empowering the Secretary of State to name up to 10 American CEOs and executives to serve in a volunteer capacity as ambassadors of the United States while remaining in their executive roles.

The responsibilities of the Special Envoys would be limited but impactful. They would attend quarterly meetings with the Secretary of State at Foggy Bottom, engage with the local U.S. embassies around the globe, and participate in State Department communications to the broader world. In turn, the Special Envoys would be empowered to help advise the State Department on the most important issues of the day, receive official invitations to travel with the Secretary of State abroad, and even be granted security clearances. The secretary would have full discretion over who to appoint—and the individual appointments would reflect the values and priorities of a given administration.

This program would benefit the United States in multiple ways. First, appointing business executives as envoys allows the U.S. government to leverage networks, expertise, and public profiles of the executives. American CEOs have significant power and influence. While the State Department may not be able to dictate their businesses’ priorities, having a strong relationship with these executives can help develop a more united approach to engagement and increase the potential for greater public-private partnerships.

When it comes to soft power, companies play a particularly important role as they hold the keys to the crown jewels of American cultural properties. In 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with Walt Disney Company CEO Bob Iger to privately urge him to bring Disneyland to Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> While Iger simply made a commitment to visit Saudi Arabia instead, the interaction is telling. U.S. companies and institutions wield elements of American power that the State Department simply does not control. The State Department can better leverage brands and cultural properties by working directly with CEOs.

Second, the program would also benefit the State Department by giving Foggy Bottom a greater understanding of the challenges and problems facing American businesses operating abroad. While the State Department spends considerable resources on promoting economic prosperity—the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs has a mandate to support economic growth—it is unclear how the office engages with American businesses for guidance and consultation. Similarly, while the Office of Global Partnerships oversees private sector engagement, most of this engagement takes the form of developing public-private partnerships to support goals such as education, climate improvement, and other administration priorities.<sup>6</sup> These are worthy initiatives but do not touch the key challenges facing American companies doing business abroad. The new special envoys will be uniquely positioned to advise the secretary on the most important challenges facing American business interests.

Third, developing a stronger relationship with American executives allows the State Department to better prevent foreign governments from using the American business community as leverage. Some reports indicated that Gates's visit to China, as well as celebratory visits by other American executives including Schwarzman, Dimon, Mary Barra, Elon Musk, and Tim Cook, were meant to force a narrative that American companies are resisting the U.S. government's more competitive stance towards U.S.-China relations.<sup>7</sup> The parade of visits left an impression for many that the U.S. business community was more at odds with government policy than not. Of course, this disconnect at times may be very real. Not all firms' interests will always align with that of the United States. But by developing closer ties to industry, the State Department can more effectively suppress foreign entities' attempts to spin these kinds of narratives. The State Department would instead project a posture that shows more unified alignment between the U.S. government and private sector.

At the same time, creating a Special Envoy program with a select group of American CEOs may also empower the Secretary of State to shape how executives operate internationally. Currently, there are very few tools in the U.S. government's portfolio to influence corporate behavior abroad. And most of those tools are sticks rather than carrots. The Commerce Department's Entity List and agencies like CFIUS and the Office Foreign Military Sales provide strict guardrails and sanctions against certain business practices. This Special Envoy program could provide a small yet meaningful way for the U.S. Secretary of State to develop a genuine incentive within the American business community. The Special Envoy position would be an exclusive and glamorous opportunity. Invitations to state dinners, access to the highest levels of U.S. government, interactions with U.S. embassies around the world, and other diplomatic perks can make these billets incredibly attractive to business executives.

And it's clear that business executives would likely be interested in this program. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have long included business executives within the State Department as ambassadors at plum embassy postings abroad. This practice, often criticized by foreign service officers and foreign policy professionals for introducing individuals with no experience in running embassy operations, also fails to maximize the benefits for the U.S. government since these ambassadors have naturally had to leave their corporate positions. The new Special Envoy program would instead leverage executives' networks and influence while they sit atop their businesses, all while preserving opportunities for foreign service officers to serve as chiefs of mission abroad.

Empowering American CEOs in a volunteer capacity of course creates the risk of conflicts of interest. But the U.S. government has handled this tension before. Today, American executives compose numerous advisory

committees at other departments. They all have found ways to effectively approach conflicts of interest while providing a forum for consultation. The Defense Business Board and Defense Innovation Board, which include executives from top defense contractors and technology companies, have strict guidelines for managing financial conflicts of interest. The State Department can develop strong and clear rules dictating how the Special Envoys engage and ensure that they do not inappropriately harm their American competitors or use their volunteer positions for pure personal gain. At the end of the day, these envoys would also not be responsible for dictating an administration's agenda: while they will play an important advisory and even public-facing role in representing America, they will not be tasked with creating or changing policy.

American executives and U.S. government officials will not always see eye to eye. This Special Envoy system would not attempt to fuse the government and private sector. Our country benefits from having a vibrant and independent business community. But empowering Special Envoys will help bridge the growing divide that foreign populations see between our government and our businesses. At the very least this program would recognize the leading American executives for what they are: emissaries of American dynamism and culture.

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