

# Visualizing collaborations beyond borders: Illustrating congruences between U.S. public diplomacy and U.S. multinational corporations' global societal engagements

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## Abstract

This exploratory study illustrates possible congruences in areas of engagement between U.S. public diplomacy efforts and U.S. multinational corporations' social responsibility initiatives abroad. For that, the study provides a review of U.S. government public-private partnerships' efforts disclosed in U.S. Department of State reports and a review of U.S. multinational corporations' depth and range of global societal engagements as revealed in their CSR reports. Visualizing the assortment of mutual areas of engagement may help further inform the U.S. Department of State's approaches in engaging U.S. multinational corporations in U.S. public diplomacy programs. Conversely, such illustrative examples might help motivate U.S. companies looking for mutual areas of partnership with the U.S. government.

**Keywords:** public diplomacy, corporate social responsibility (csr), public-private partnerships, multinational corporations

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## Introduction

Perhaps the role of business has changed. Or perhaps, given the most recent international events, businesses have a new way of understanding their purpose while operating on a global level (Kempster, 2022). Many corporations raise the value of their business by also making positive social impact such as being involved in climate change conferences (COP), responding to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (the UN Global Compact) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises), or investing in and reporting on their environmental and social engagements. Such engagements have been conceptualized as corporate social responsibility (CSR), which “refers to a business practice that involves participating in initiatives that benefit society and often take the form of organizations engaging with their wider local community” (Vanc & Masler, 2021, p. 166).

If we imagine that the role of business is “to enhance the world” (Kempster & Jackson, 2021, p. 51), then corporate social responsibility projects developed by multinational corporations are more than “cosmetic window-dressing” and allow for more inclusive work as corporations become “engaged in community development in developed and developing countries to ensure political stability, a steady supply of goods and services, and a more constructive partnership with the people in the countries where they operate” (Saner & Yiu, 2014, p. 312). In furthering Hocking’s (2004) view that corporations are “increasingly locked into a web of interactions with governments and civil society organizations” (p. 149), Wang (2006) noted that corporations in partnership with government and other non-governmental organizations could play an important role in public diplomacy because such involvement appeals to corporations’ “altruistic concerns of being a positive social force by contributing to peace and development in the global community” (p. 46).

The study of public–private sector partnerships has gained increasing attention in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy has been described as “the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented” (Sharp, 2005, p. 106) as well as an “international actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public” (Cull, 2009, p.12). In practice, partnerships grew out of collective efforts between actors from a wide range of backgrounds focused on specific goals (Cull, 2019; Gregory, 2008). Among such actors with “unique strengths,” Cull (2019) said, are “corporate actors with deep pockets and an eagerness to demonstrate their inherent goodness” (p. 142). In a world “full of problems with no passports” (UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan cited in Cull, 2019, p. 142), climate change, epidemics, or terrorism, partnerships have become central to public diplomacy as a way to maximize resources, and build credibility with diverse publics (Cull, 2019).

Yet, although scholars have recognized the role of CSR in public diplomacy and the importance of public-private partnerships, literature has fallen short in illustrating opportunities for collaboration between U.S. multinational corporations and U.S. Department of State (DOS). This paper seeks to identify the most popular U.S. multinational corporations' global social engagements that might reveal possible congruences with U.S. public diplomacy spheres. For that, the paper provides a review of U.S. government public-private partnerships efforts disclosed in DOS archives and reports, and a review of U.S. multinational corporations' depth and range of global societal engagements as revealed in their CSR reports. Visualizing the assortment of such opportunities might help answer questions, such as what areas might the U.S. government hope to engage U.S. multinational corporations to collaborate in U.S. public diplomacy programs?

A study exploring possible congruences between U.S. public diplomacy efforts and U.S. multinational corporations' CSR initiatives abroad is significant because it identifies opportunities for strategic alignment between the public and private sectors around communal issues that may amplify the impact of both sectors. By visualizing shared areas of engagement such as the SDG goals, this work reveals how U.S. multinational corporations might potentially contribute to U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

## **Literature Review**

Multinational corporations are important players in economies and societies and due to their size and impact, they are powerful actors and active participants in global political and economic affairs (Muldoon, 2005; Ruël, 2020); influence political decisions in host countries and affect policy, media agendas, and societal change (White et al., 2011); and “touch the lives of more people than government representatives ever could” (Goodman, 2006, p. 7). Many of the “global challenges now confronting international business are issues and matters of diplomacy” (Muldoon, 2005, p. 335), as multinational corporations' international engagements may go beyond a company's economic self-interest to include a more social and political role for corporations in tackling global issues (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).

Global business has become a powerful economic and social institution and could play an important role in public diplomacy (Wang, 2006). One may argue that the discussion pertaining to the role of business in public diplomacy started decades ago, when Arthur Page, AT&T executive famously declared that all business begins with public permission and exists with public approval. In furthering Page's worldview, Goodman (2006) noted that business has rediscovered its purpose as global citizens, as it “must behave as good citizens, or lose their license to operate” (p. 5). As multinational corporations are increasingly expanding their corporate responsibility focus into global communities (Qu & Dillman Carpentier, 2021),

corporate responsibility is seen as part of multinational corporations' strategic actions that could have an impact on public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Qu & Dillman Carpentier, 2021; White, 2015).

Former Undersecretary for International Trade in the U.S. Department of Commerce, Jeffrey Garten, asserted that American corporate interests and American foreign policy have been closely related throughout history and called on the administration and business leaders to collaborate strategically to achieve their goals (Garten, 1997). Such calls for the administration and business communities to work together were later reiterated by public diplomacy scholars. Such initiatives indicate a recognition for the potential for private actors to contribute to public diplomacy's successes and a hope that strong public-private public diplomacy partnerships will achieve possible positive results (Fitzpatrick, 2010a). Tang and Li (2011) also recognized the close linkage between a country's public diplomacy efforts and the practices of its business sector and noted that it was "important to understand when the interests of the two entities overlap and when they diverge" (p. 112). Similarly, business scholars Kempster and Jackson (2021) noted that such overlap occurs "as long as social impact is complementary to enhancing organizational value" (p. 61). They described the partnership between governments and corporations as essential to businesses' contributions to addressing the challenges that face humanity with governments creating "the enabling structures to address enhancing humanity" and corporations offering "the wealth, power, resources and influence in a very real and everyday manner" (p. 51).

### ***The role of U.S. business in U.S public diplomacy***

This study can be situated within the literature which posits that CSR can function as a form of public diplomacy, regardless of whether that is its primary intent. One way multinational corporations are building their reputations is by supporting social and environmental causes in local communities around the world. U.S. multinational corporations have been important players in economies and societies where they operate (Ruël, 2020), more admired and trusted than their national governments, more culturally sensitive as they employ local populations, and more skilled experts "at building strong brands that generate goodwill, trust, and loyalty" (Reinhard, 2009, p. 198). According to the European based online news media Youmatter and the Reputation Institute Global RepTrack, the world's largest reputation benchmarking database with over 1 million company ratings per year, CSR is an indirect synonym of corporate reputation. CSR "encompasses all the practices put in place by companies in order to uphold the principles of sustainable development," and also "have a positive impact on society, and respect and preserve the environment" (Global RepTrack, 2020). The companies scoring higher, succeeded in effectively communicating

their CSR strategies toward the general public, “even if they don’t have the most effective strategies in the world” (Global RepTrack, 2020). Such practices illustrated by the Reputation Institute are in congruence with academic scholarship which demonstrates the importance of providing quality CSR policy and disclosures consistent with good corporate citizenship which legitimizes their actions (Coffie et al., 2018).

Despite being discussed in the literature, there are scarce studies that look at the actual CSR engagements of U.S. based multinational corporations in public diplomacy. Among them, White et al. (2011), have explored corporate diplomacy by U.S. corporations through CSR activities in Romania and found that corporate diplomacy was often performed in direct cooperation with Romanian government and civic leaders engaging in social causes, such as environmental issues and human rights, as well as cultural and community activities. The authors noted that by adapting CSR activities to the national context, “U.S. corporations attempt to influence public opinion about social and political issues, just as governments try to influence policies abroad through public diplomacy” (p. 290). In turn, such activities reflected positively on the United States and had the effect of public diplomacy, even though that was not the intent of the activities and there was no formal coordination with the U.S. government. In a later study, White (2015) further notes that to protect their economic self-interest, U.S. corporations were willing to support rather than to directly engage in public diplomacy and did not want to be aligned with any government bureau.

White and Fitzpatrick (2018) explored practitioners’ perspectives on corporate diplomacy and noted that even though they could not find direct involvement of multinational corporations in public diplomacy, “there was a widespread acknowledgement of the symbiotic and mutual interest in good international relationships, and that a positive image of the United States has a positive effect on business” (p. 12). The authors recognized the “potential for strategic partnerships, primarily through sharing corporate expertise and/or consulting with public diplomats” but it would be “up to the government to initiate the participation of the corporate sector in public diplomacy” (White & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 1). In a subsequent study, Fitzpatrick, et al. (2020) highlighted that multinational corporations indirectly advance diplomatic goals through ethical and responsible operations in foreign locations. Yet, multinational corporations, especially those based in the United States have little motivation to engage directly in government efforts to advance public diplomacy objectives or to participate in public-private diplomatic partnerships between governments and multinational corporations (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).

On the other hand, recent global events might have indeed changed the ways businesses see their role in the new geopolitical global marketplace today. In 2021, Weber Shandwick in partnership with KRC Research, conducted an online global multi-marker survey among

1,217 multinational business executives in 12 countries, named *Home Country as a Stakeholder, The Rising Geopolitical Risk for Business Leaders* aiming to explore the role of global business today. They found, among other things that, 1) home country is considered a top three business stakeholder; 2) national security exceeds diversity and inclusion, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and climate change in importance; 3) in some instances, national security or economic interests should come before the bottom line; and, 4) executives feel the pressure to take a position on geopolitical issues, but they are unprepared for the geopolitical risk. In particular to the United States CEOs and corporate presidents, Weber Shandwick found that, 1) 70 percent rank home country as the first among “very” important stakeholders; 2) 98 percent (61% very important, 37 somewhat important) say home country interests are critical to business decision-making; 4) 97 percent (61% very important, 36 somewhat important) say corporate and home country national values must align; 5) 94 percent say vulnerability to geopolitical risks will grow; 6) 90 percent agree their companies should prepare to take a more public position on geopolitical issues; and 7) 82 percent are in agreement that there are instances where home country national security or economic interests should be placed above a company’s bottom line. These findings reveal surprising insights, inferring that U.S. companies might be more inclined to intentionally explore ways to advance or protect U.S. national interests, align the company’s actions and values with national values, develop a foreign policy that aligns with the U.S. foreign policy, and engage in U.S. geopolitical issues.

### ***U.S. public-private partnerships: a brief history***

The U.S. government defines a partnership as a collaborative working relationship with nongovernmental partners “in which the goals, structure, and governance, as well as roles and responsibilities, are mutually determined and decision making is shared” (S/GP, 2014, p. 4). Noticeably similar, public diplomacy is described as “a multi-stakeholder, collaborative, relationship-focused activity” (Cull, 2019, p. 161) as part of a country’s broad global public engagement.

The focus on partnerships as strategic relationships is not new. In fact, examples of such partnerships started with the Cold War, when experiences of public-private cooperation fostered a symbiotic relationship, particularly in educational and cultural exchanges (Mogensen, 2017). With the turn of this century, DOS has further embarked on a series of initiatives that sought to broaden its partnerships to include the private sector in its public diplomacy practices. Such examples can be found with the creation of the Secretary’s Office of Global Partnerships (S/GP) in 2009. The placement of this office is also notable, as S/GP responds directly to the Secretary of State, and therefore elevates the importance placed on

global partnerships. S/GP was envisioned to build public-private partnerships and to use them in innovative ways to strengthen diplomacy and development outcomes. Further, the creation of the Global Partnership Initiative (GPI) in 2009 also aimed to advance the idea that partnerships with non-state actors were critical for addressing complex global issues effectively, especially in economic growth, global health, education, and environmental sustainability. The 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (DOS, QDDR) placed focus on building “strategic public-private partnerships to draw on the ingenuity and resources of the private sector, non-governmental organizations, foundations, and community-based organizations” (DOS, QDDR, 2010, p. 22) to promote innovation and technological change. The 2015 QDDR also recognized the importance of continuing the modernization of development policies and practices initiated by the 2010 QDDR, including “a new model of development that weaves together local ownership, private investment, innovation, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and high expectations for mutual accountability” (DOS, QDDR, 2015, p. 19).

The U.S. government has also placed high importance on recognizing U.S. business social engagements as public diplomacy efforts. Such initiatives included government awards for U.S. responsible business abroad, conferences, workshops, and collaborations with U.S. businesses and universities. For instance, in 1999, DOS in collaboration with the Office of Commercial and Business Affairs (CBA) pioneered the Secretary of State’s annual Award for Corporate Excellence (ACE) to recognize and honor U.S. companies that uphold high standards as responsible members of their communities. The award acknowledges that business has the expertise, the innovation, the resources, and the reach to make a real difference in confronting challenges. Over the years, the award’s description has evolved to include language specific to DOS’s activities abroad and to resemble the OECD Guidelines and the UN Guiding Principles, “the ACE recognizes and honors U.S. companies that uphold high standards as responsible members of their communities and represent American values in the way they do business in their overseas operations” (CBA, 2021). ACE winners have been recognized for their breakthrough work in the following areas: sustainable oceans management, inclusive hiring practices, transparent operations, human rights and labor rights initiatives, environmental sustainability and disaster relief, maternal health programs, education and livelihood programs. The award has been presented every year since 1999.

In January 2007, DOS in collaboration with the Public Relations Coalition, hosted the Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy as part of an effort to engage the private sector and private citizens in public diplomacy efforts. Over 160 top public relations executives and top government leaders discussed opportunities for greater private sector involvement and support for U.S. public diplomacy. The Summit identified 11 models for action for greater private sector involvement and support for U.S. public diplomacy including business practices

consistent with U.S. values. To encourage such efforts, Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the creation of the Benjamin Franklin Award to be presented annually to honor a company, academic institution, or other non-governmental entity for their outstanding contributions to advancing America's ideals around the globe through public diplomacy. The award was envisioned as the most prestigious honor that DOS can bestow on U.S. citizens and non-governmental organizations.

In June 2012, the DOS Office of the Global Partnership Initiative in collaboration with the Institute for Corporate Responsibility at the George Washington University School of Business hosted a conference named *Uncommon Alliances: Real Partnerships, Real Experiences, Real Impacts*. Participants in interactive workshops viewed public-private partnerships as central to strengthening diplomacy and development outcomes around the world and noted the importance of understanding how to design, manage and sustain partnerships that are purposeful and impactful.

Over the years, the Global Partnership Week (GPW) remained the most visible event organized by DOS in collaboration with other governmental, non-governmental, and private organizations around the world. The main purpose of GPW events in Washington was to recognize the role public-private partnerships play in promoting diplomacy and development.

The relationship between DOS and American universities began in 2013 with the creation of the Diplomacy Lab. The Lab was envisioned as a partnership with American universities to enable DOS to “course-source” research and innovation related to foreign policy by harnessing the efforts of students and faculty at universities across the country. More than 60 colleges and universities from across the United States participate in Diplomacy Lab each year, and every spring, participating universities present their projects in an all-day Diplomacy Lab Fair. Topics included climate change, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, women's rights, urban planning, architecture, computer science, cybersecurity, countering violent extremism, post-war reconstruction, cultural/educational exchanges, international studies, and regional studies.

The relationship between DOS and the business community was further documented through the P3 Impact and P3 Impact Accelerator Awards. P3 Impact was launched in 2014 by DOS Office of Global Partnership in collaboration with Concordia and the University of Virginia Darden School Institute for Business in Society. The P3 award recognizes any cross-sector collaboration that features public, private, nonprofit, or non-governmental organizations and is awarded to the best international partnerships that are improving local communities and the world in the most impactful ways. The award winner is announced at the Concordia Summit in New York City every fall. P3 Impact Accelerator was launched in 2020 to support innovative public-private partnerships and to address common challenges and questions

experienced by early-stage multi-sector partnerships.

To further encourage U.S. companies to embrace high standards of responsible business conduct, in 2016 the United States launched its first-ever *National Action Plan on Responsible Business Conduct* (RBC/NAP). The publication of the 2016 RBC/NAP involved at least 16 U.S. department and agencies, including the DOS, Labor, Commerce, and the Treasury; the U.S. Agency for International Development; the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative; and the Environmental Protection Agency, which “marks the first time the U.S. government has undertaken a whole-of-government process to focus, improve, and expand its efforts to promote RBC” (p. 4). RBC/NAP is organized into five categories of action including, (1) Leading by Example, (2) Collaborating with Stakeholders, (3) Facilitating RBC by Companies, (4) Recognizing Positive Performance, and (5) Providing Access to Remedy. In addition, RBC/NAP presents ways in which the U.S. government works in collaboration with business and other stakeholders to promote an environment for responsible conduct by businesses operating overseas in areas such as human rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, labor rights, land tenure and property rights, anti-corruption, transparency, and the environment. The former Secretary of State, John Kerry noted, “We undertook this process to enhance coordination within our government, push for higher standards and a more level playing field globally, and strengthen public-private coordination to help U.S. companies attain their responsible conduct goals in a variety of environments around the world” (DOS, RBC/NAP, 2016, introductory letter).

The 2024 *U.S. Government’s National Action Plan on Responsible Business Conduct* further recognizes that the “government plays a critical role in creating an enabling environment for businesses to succeed” (DOS, 2024, p. 4), and expands on the 2016 RBC/NAP, addressing ways in which the U.S. government can promote and encourage established norms of responsible business conduct with respect to human rights, such as transparency, sustainability, protecting the environment, and combating the climate crisis, as well as the nexus of technology and human rights. Public-private partnerships are viewed as an increasingly critical tool in leveraging the innovation, resources, and solutions-driven approach of the private sector, which includes businesses, NGOs, universities, foundations, faith-based groups, private charities, and migrant and diaspora communities.

This paper seeks to identify the congruences between U.S. public diplomacy and U.S. multinational corporations’ global societal engagements in order to visualize possible areas of collaborations beyond U.S. borders between the DOS and U.S. multinational corporations. For that, the paper posits the following research questions,

RQ1: *What are the U.S. government’s most prevalent areas of global public diplomacy engagements?*

RQ2: *What are the U.S. multinational corporations' most prevalent areas of global societal engagements?*

RQ3: *What are the potential areas of collaboration between the U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations in public diplomacy programs?*

## Method

### *Population, sample, timeframe*

In order to explore opportunities for collaborations in U.S. public diplomacy between the U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations, this study examined DOS documents and U.S. multinational corporations as follows: 1) DOS archive website, and the S/GP website and the available S/GP annual reports (i.e. 2014-2020); and 2) U.S. multinational corporations' CSR reports published during 2018, 2019, 2020. The timeframe was particularly selected to allow a comparison between the latest available Global Partnerships reports (2018, 2019, 2020) at the time the study was written, and the same three years of available U.S. corporations' CSR reports. According to Global RepTrack, 42 U.S. multinational corporations were ranked in the top 100 in 2018 (see Table 1). As a consequence, a total of 114 available reports for these 42 multinationals were included in the analysis (40 reports from 2018, 37 from 2019, and 38 from 2020), which comprised about 8,500 pages.

**Table 1.** Top U.S. multinational corporations with the best corporate (CSR) Reputation in 2018 Global RepTrack

Rank	Company	Rank	Company	Rank	Company
5	Harley Davison	35	Marriott	72	Dell
8	Walt Disney	37	Good Year	74	Whirlpool
10	Microsoft	39	Cisco	76	Hershey
12	Netflix	46	Apple	77	Honeywell
14	Levi Strauss	47	Mastercard	78	Costco
15	Google	48	Caterpillar	80	P&G
16	Intel	49	Hewlett Packard	82	ELI LILLY AND COMPANY
20	3M	50	Colgate	86	HILTON
22	Nike	54	IBM	89	Salesforce
24	Hyatt	55	Estee Lauder	90	Kimberly Clark
26	Visa	56	Tesla	91	Ralph Lauren
30	Kelloggs	57	KraftHeinz	92	Amazon
31	HP Living	60	Mattel	94	Bristol Myers
34	PayPal	62	Adobe	95	SC Johnson

## Thematic analysis

The analysis is two-fold. The first step included a thorough section-by-section/paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the 1) DOS archive website and documents to identify public-private initiatives and global public diplomacy areas of engagement, and 2) U.S. corporations' CSR reports, to identify major areas of global social engagements. Additionally, an open coding technique was used in NVivo 14 data coding software, to capture emergent key words and communal areas of engagements/themes for both sets of documents.

The second step helped understand the U.S. corporations' CSR engagements through the lens of the U.S. government. For that, the analysis included an assessment of the main CSR engagements during 2018, 2019, 2020 compared to the Award for Corporate Excellence categories for the same timeframe 2018, 2019, 2020 as defined in the ACE calls (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Award for Corporate Excellence - Award categories for 2018, 2019, 2020

2018	2019	2020
<b>Award for Corporate Excellence in Sustainable Operations</b> for incorporating sustainability into core policies and decision-making, including environmental, social, or other types of sustainability practices.	<b>Award for Corporate Excellence in Sustainable Operations</b> for incorporating sustainability into core policies and decision-making, including environmental, social, or other types of sustainability practices.	<b>Award for Corporate Excellence for Innovation</b> for using emerging technologies to provide breakthrough solutions and products in line with American values.
<b>Award for Corporate Excellence in Women's Economic Empowerment</b> for supporting women's economic empowerment through its values, strategies, policies, programs, procedures, and/or operational practices.	<b>Award for Corporate Excellence in Women's Economic Empowerment</b> for supporting women's economic empowerment through its values, strategies, policies, programs, procedures, and/or operational practices.	<b>Award for Corporate Excellence in Sustainable Energy Security</b> for developing resilient and responsible sourcing, generation, transmission, and delivery of energy or energy resources in and from its international operations.
<b>Award for Corporate Excellence by a Small or Medium* Enterprise (SME)</b> for exemplifying the highest ideals of responsible business through overall values, strategies, policies and procedures, and operational practices.		<b>Award for Corporate Excellence for Women's Economic Empowerment</b> for supporting women's economic empowerment through its values, strategies, policies and procedures, and operational practices.

\*Because this study only explored the CSR reports by U.S. Multinational corporations, the 2018 Award for Corporate Excellence by a Small or Medium Enterprise was excluded from the analysis.

To identify congruences between U.S. multinational corporations' global societal engagements and the responsible business practices recognized as public diplomacy efforts by the U.S. government, particular emphasis was placed on the emerging keywords used in the detailed definitions in the ACE calls (Table 3).

**Table 3.** ACE categories/ CSR Themes and key words

ACE Category / CSR Theme	Key words in ACE award description
Sustainable Operations / Sustainability	environmental sustainability, sustainable operations, human rights
Sustainable Energy Security / Sourcing	responsible sourcing, energy technology, renewable energy
Innovation / Innovation	innovation technology, emerging technology, innovative ideas, solutions, innovative products, AI
Women's Economic Empowerment/N/A	women's empowerment, gender equality, women's entrepreneurship

## Findings

### *RQ1 US government's global public diplomacy areas of engagements*

A review of the DOS archive website, S/GP website, and S/GP annual reports provides insights into the main areas of engagements with the private sector. For instance, the S/GP reports available on the DOS archive website (7 reports, 2014 through 2020, total 188 pages) feature a total of 87 successful public-private partnerships (10 in 2014; 14 in 2015; 10 in 2016; 17 in 2017; 7 in 2018; 9 in 2019; 20 in 2020) between U.S. government and actors, such as U.S. businesses, international corporations, other countries' governments, various global nonprofits.

The S/GP reports are organized following OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which makes it easy to identify the main areas of engagements. Partnerships featured in these reports were associations of governments, state agencies, businesses, and/or nonprofit organizations from the United States, host countries, or multiple countries in a geopolitical region. Among U.S. corporations engaged in global public-private partnerships with the U.S. government are Caterpillar, Cisco Systems, Citigroup, Coca-Cola, Dell EMC, Facebook, FedEx, Goldman Sachs, Google, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, IBM, Mastercard, Microsoft, Pfizer, Visa, and Uber. Most partnerships feature clusters of U.S. corporations working on projects related to their specific industries. A deeper analysis of the S/GP reports revealed seven emerging themes for the public-private partnerships including *innovation* (102 references) especially pertaining to *technology* (70 references), *sustainability* (101 references), *environment* (44 references) especially in relation to *energy* (61 references) and *climate* (48 references), *entrepreneurship* (59 references), *community* (58 references), and *health* (41 references). The most visibly skewed category pertained to *women* (212 references – 1 reference in 2014 & 103 references in 2020) and *girls* (78 references – 0 references in 2014 & 17 references in 2020).

For instance, partnerships focusing on *sustainability* and *environment* revolved around

global ocean and water conservation, oceanographic collaborations in Africa, plastic pollution in Europe, sustainable fishing in North America, wildlife trafficking worldwide, affordable energy in sub-Saharan Africa, and responsible minerals trade in Central Africa. *Entrepreneurship* partnerships focused on strengthening the global startup ecosystems and catalyzing U.S. business expansion in emerging markets (i.e., Africa, Southeast Asia, Middle East, and North Africa), building the next generation of entrepreneurs in Africa, and engaging with science and technology innovators and entrepreneurs worldwide. *Community* partnerships noted diaspora, culinary tourism, and local farming in Columbia, Congo and Peru. Global *health* partnerships focused on fighting cancers and HIV infections in Africa, and AIDS, TB, and Malaria awareness worldwide. *Initiatives for women and girls* included global partnerships in science and STEAM fields, matching loan funds, mentorship programs, opportunities for economic rise, entrepreneurship and economic empowerment, and programs to combat violence against women.

## ***RQ2 U.S. multinational corporations' areas of global societal engagements***

The initial examination of the 114 reports shows that many of these 42 corporations reported their global engagements using the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Delving deeper into the types of projects presented in the reports, five main areas of engagements emerged including *sustainability* (110 reports, 96% with 1270 references) and *environmental impact* (110 reports, 96% with 1207 references) and concern for the *local communities* (105 reports, 92%, 585 references) in which these companies operate globally. Many reports espoused a universal commitment to *sourcing* (103 reports, 90% with 628 references) and *innovation* (96 reports, 84% with 377 references) across all areas of engagements.

*Sustainability.* This was the most prevalent area of engagement and included a range of activities as diverse as the companies that engaged in these projects. Projects that referenced sustainability noted environmental sustainability, corporate sustainability, and sustainability initiatives/programs/commitments. Companies' engagement in sustainable operations noted internal commitments, occasional struggles, and felt very local, illustrating the state of interconnectivity between the supply chain and local communities. For instance, Hershey's operations in Brazil transform waste to energy, while its plants in El Salto and Monterrey achieved a 96% rate for on-site recycling. Kellogg Latin America trains almost 300 farmers how to improve yields while growing yellow maize sustainably. In Germany, Amazon is supporting urban greening in an effort to reduce climate change risks and increase species biodiversity in three cities. In China, Apple is contributing to the country's Sustainable Plantation Management Guidelines which were informed by Apple's project and adopted by

China's National Forestry and Grassland Administration and were further selected by the national government for use in the National Reserve Forest Plan.

*Environmental impact.* Concern for environmental impact was another major area of engagement for these 42 multinationals. As most companies presented extensive policies for reducing their environmental footprint, three main subcategories emerged, especially for *emissions* (104 reports, 91% with 866 references), *climate* (93 reports, 82% with 407 references), and *carbon* (91 reports, 80% with 335 references). Within these subcategories, environmental projects pertained mostly to *water* (104 reports, 91% with 1092 references), *waste* (102 reports, 89% with 603 references) and *plastic* (67 reports, 59% with 346 references). For instance, Levi Strauss enabled training and employment for local women, freeing up more than 120 million liters for the local water supply in Cape Town. Marriott's Juma REDD+ reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in several projects such as Brazil's Amazon rainforest, mangrove restoration in Thailand, and tree planting in Alberta, Canada. Kimberly-Clark incentivized waste pickers to divert plastic from the environment in India. P&G used innovative technology that enabled a new method of construction based on recycled plastic in Thailand and Costa Rica. Estée Lauder has zero industrial waste-to-landfill commitment for its manufacturing and distribution sites in Canada, United Kingdom, Belgium and Switzerland where if waste cannot be reused or recycled, it is converted to energy by licensed power plants or by co-processing at cement kilns.

*Local community.* Global engagements were viewed through local lens indigenous to the communities in which each company operates. Human capital such as *employees* (108 reports, 95%, 1040 references) and *community* (109 reports, 96%, 719 references) were referenced to illustrate companies' engagements with local communities. For instance, Kraft Heinz' initiative to strengthen business and technical skills in the developing world, provides Honduran coffee farmers access to agricultural support to adapt their farming practices to the effects of a changing climate. In Malaysia, Intel helps its employees establish eco-farming with a sustainable zero-waste eco-cycle community farm using compostable food waste and recycled rainwater, while in India, Intel employees volunteered to provide digital training and capacity building for special educators and parents of children with deaf-blindness. A subcategory pertaining to local community was *health* (95 reports, 83% with 476 references). Companies partnered with local governments or local nonprofits to assist in health projects. For instance, SC Johnson, partnered with the Rwanda Ministry of Health and the Society for Family Health Rwanda to co-develop a national strategy to increase access to health care through the construction of health posts across the country to help address public health issues including malaria, HIV/AIDS and family planning. Ralph Lauren partnered with Business for Social Responsibility HERprojectTM in Bangladesh to provide information on women's health topics such as healthy eating, personal and menstrual hygiene and maternal health. HP Living

deployed a network of cloud-enabled eHealth Centers to expand healthcare access across India, which were used to support India's pandemic response. Estée Lauder's breast cancer campaign partners with local organizations that support public education, donate funds, hygiene supplies and help provide medical services for patients who reside in low-income communities in Mexico, South Korea, South Africa, U.K. and Ireland. Colgate provides free pop-up dental clinics in Mumbai, while in South Africa it launched the "Buy A Brush, Help A Child" campaign to improve children's oral health.

*Sourcing.* Responsible *sourcing* (103 reports, 90% with 628 references) was an important topic in many projects. For instance, Tesla is engaged in the Responsible Minerals Initiative Cobalt Reporting Template, which recognizes the higher risks of human rights issues within cobalt supply chains, particularly regarding child labor in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Tesla ensures that responsible and ethical mining is an important part of the economic and social well-being of local communities in the region. In India, Estée Lauder is participating in sustainable solutions intended to eradicate child labor in the mica mining industry. In Malaysia, Hershey ensures that partner companies meet the company's expectations of the Supplier Code of Conduct or Responsible Recruiting & Employment Policy, especially with respect to human rights commitment. Overall, sourcing was indigenous to the local population and was intrinsically connected to ethical practices and international regulations.

*Innovation.* An overarching commitment to innovation was espoused for all these 42 multinationals, especially in relation to technology. For example, Microsoft engaged in a health project assessing agricultural practices to pinpoint where changes in agricultural management result in the greatest benefits for surface water quality and groundwater conditions. For this, Microsoft is working with AI, The Freshwater Trust and Upstream Tech using Azure and AI tools to expand the BasinScout Platform in Brazil. This project relies on almost 4,000 volunteers mobilized in groups from diverse backgrounds, such as schools, universities, churches, scouts, community centers, and others, who monitor water quality with a kit. Cisco expanded its Supportive Housing & Innovation Fund in Rome, Italy where homelessness is on the rise. Cisco partnered with local implementation organizations to supply the technology they need to support and scale their operations. Intel installed alternative energy generation systems worldwide, among which the largest solar thermal system installation in a semiconductor plant in Malaysia, the first and largest solar photovoltaic rooftop power project in Vietnam, and its numerous projects in India received the Smart Energy Decisions Innovation award for industrial on-site energy solutions.

### ***RQ3 Potential collaborations between U.S. government and U.S. business in public diplomacy***

The analysis shows palpable congruences between three ACE categories and CSR themes, including *sustainability*, *sourcing*, and *innovation* and their corresponding ACE key words *environmental sustainability*, *responsible sourcing*, *renewable energy*, *innovation technology*, *innovative solutions ideas*, and *products* (see table 4). To further identify the prevalence of key terms for the ACE category *sustainable energy security*, a subsequent analysis of the U.S. corporations' reports shows that *technology* was noted in 103 reports (562 references) and *security* in 79 reports (322 references) almost always in correlation with other issues such as innovation, sustainability, climate, health.

**Table 4.** Congruences between U.S. public diplomacy and U.S. multinational corporations' global societal engagements

Areas of engagements	ACE key words	U.S. government	U.S. corporations
Sustainable Operations / Sustainability	environmental sustainability, sustainable operations, human rights	*	*
Sustainable Energy Security / Sourcing	responsible sourcing, energy technology, renewable energy	*	*
Innovation / Innovation	innovation technology, emerging technology, innovative ideas, solutions, innovative products, AI	*	*
Women's Economic Empowerment	women's empowerment, gender equality, women's entrepreneurship	*	

One notable absence in the U.S. corporations' reports is the ACE category of *women's economic empowerment*, which did not emerge as a standalone area of engagement. To better understand the discrepancy, a subsequent analysis was performed using the specific key words and expressions in this ACE call description. Results show that, 1) *Women's economic empowerment* received only one reference. Therefore, an additional search was performed for the broader terms "women's empowerment," "empower women," "empowering women." Results yielded a small number of mentions exclusively in headings or lists of commitments with no examples or details (i.e., 13 reports in 2018, 14 in 2019, 13 in 2020). 2) *Gender equality* pertaining to women in the workplace, leadership and business received less than 10 mentions each year, mostly noted as commitments. 3) *Women entrepreneurship* was mentioned only once, therefore, a broader search was conducted for the key words "women business" and "women's owned business." Results yielded a small number of references in lists of commitments (i.e., 14 reports in 2018, 10 in 2019, 10 in 2020).

## **Discussion and Implications**

This exploratory study provides an empirical examination of the possible areas of collaborations beyond borders between U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations. With public diplomacy increasingly viewed as a network of public and private actors, where “the private sector has the potential to play a role in public diplomacy” (White 2015, p. 308), this study illustrates how U.S. multinational corporations have the potential to play an intentional role in advancing public diplomacy through public-private partnerships with the U.S. government. Findings also further Weber Shandwick’s (2021) research, in that U.S. companies might be more inclined to intentionally explore ways to advance or protect U.S. national interests, by illustrating how U.S. multinational corporations are already locked into a web of public diplomacy collaborations with the U.S. government beyond U.S. borders.

The most revealing finding is the breadth and depth of global social engagements by both U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations. The congruences in areas of engagement fit around projects that focus on sustainability and environmental impact, sustainable sourcing, and innovation. One divergent area was the ACE category of women’s economic empowerment. Notably, S/GP reports show this ACE category became an area of interest for the U.S. government toward the end of the period explored by this study.

The Sustainable Development agenda adopted by all United Nations Member States, along with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, represent a potential shared blueprint of engagements for both U.S. business and the U.S. government. Findings show that top U.S. multinational corporations have embraced the SDGs and are using them as a basis to frame their global social engagements, while the U.S. government is promoting the OECD Guidelines as public diplomacy goals. The Award for Corporate Excellence illustrates the U.S. government’s determination to validate U.S. businesses’ global social engagements as public diplomacy initiatives. While RBC/NAP offers a path for how U.S. companies can achieve high standards of responsible business conduct and informs how the U.S. government supports those that achieve such best practices.

### ***The U.S. government***

The study sheds light into the many domestic initiatives put forth by DOS (e.g., Private Sector Summit, Uncommon Alliances Conference) to garner the attention of and consult with business executives on how the corporate sector can play a more proactive intentional role in public diplomacy. These initiatives were considered successful in bringing the public and private sector together to shed light on the potential of public-private partnerships, yet it is unclear whether these initiatives were sustained over time. The study also shows that all

domestic programs presented in the S/GP reports initiated with the U.S. government, which illustrates that the private sector's level of engagement relies heavily on the U.S. government. Public diplomacy scholars have made a strong case in arguing that effective public diplomacy increasingly engages domestic audiences in meaningful collaborations (Cull, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2010b; Huijgh, 2011; Riordan, 2005). The study makes an argument for a U.S. Department of State deeper continuous investment in engaging with the U.S. private sector. Such investment can provide an established network of collaborations that could help bring "fresh eyes" and "fresh brains" (Pigman & Deos, 2008), and understanding how to design, manage and sustain partnerships to develop and strengthen U.S. public diplomacy (DOS, *Uncommon Alliances*, 2012).

The strategic direction to engage with the corporate sector could also help the formation of long-term purposeful and impactful alliances and help achieve greater private sector involvement and support for U.S. public diplomacy. Condoleezza Rice's, former Secretary of State, statement during the Private Sector Summit (2007), that "the solutions to the challenges of the 21st century are not going to be met by government alone" rather from "vital partnership between government and the private sector," and John Kerry's, former Secretary of State and Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, call, "we welcome you to reach out with suggestions on how public-private partnerships can further accelerate climate solutions toward a net-zero, resilient future" (S/GP, 2023, p. 4), are evident that it is in the U.S. government interest to engage with the private sector. The study confirms the assertion that the government must initiate the participation of the corporate sector in public diplomacy (Lee & Ayhan, 2015; White & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

### ***The U.S. corporate sector.***

This study found that at least 10 of the 42 multinational corporations included in this study are already engaged in public-private partnerships with the U.S. government (e.g., Caterpillar, Cisco, Citigroup, Dell, Google, HP, IBM, Mastercard, Microsoft, Visa) in projects that align these companies' values with national values, such as social and economic development initiatives associated with sustainability and environmental impact, resource exploitation, and innovation. Such examples of public-private partnerships further the assertion that the U.S. private sector has the potential to contribute to public diplomacy's success (Cull 2019).

The inherent nature of corporations' engagement is indigenous to their global markets, which helps them establish an emotional bond with the local communities. Findings reveal that these corporations are most active in SDG goals pertaining to their businesses' areas of expertise (e.g., Tesla engaged in ethical sourcing; Colgate, SC Johnson, Estée Lauder in global health; Dell, IBM, Microsoft, Cisco in renewable energy and technology innovation

projects), the majority show concern for waste and energy reduction, and many focus on issues that are related to the broader international agenda (e.g., human rights, labor conditions, poverty). Engaging in such social initiatives within local communities worldwide enables U.S. multinational corporations to advance their SDG goals, while also potentially contributing to public diplomacy objectives.

## **Limitations and future studies**

This exploratory study provides a rare illustration of one country's efforts in public-private partnerships. Therefore, although comprehensive, the findings are limited and cannot be generalized beyond the country analyzed here, the United States. However, as a foundational piece, the insights could inform future studies exploring other countries' efforts in public-private partnerships, particularly the United Nations member states adhering to the Sustainable Development Goals.

These 42 U.S. corporations were narrowly considered, especially for their CSR reputation. Although some of these corporations' engagements may go beyond their long-term self-interest, a question that arises is how many of these and other companies consider their social engagements beyond their company's profit-driven motives to include "broader concerns for country image and the improvement of global society" (White & Bolewski, 2023, p. 69). The Award for Corporate Excellence further illustrates which companies' foreign social engagements influence public diplomacy activities by the U.S. government, but "even if private parties are successful in developing positive relationships with foreign publics, who reaps the benefits of those relationships?" (Fitzpatrick 2009, p. 168). More empirical research is needed "to explore to what degree and in which situations corporations play a diplomatic, positive role in foreign relations, as well as when they do not" (Westermann-Behaylo et al. 2015, p. 400).

In the context of the second Trump administration's major federal policy changes, including staff cuts at environmental agencies and the recent increases in tariffs to prevent national supply chains from over-dependence on a foreign country's products, multinational companies are facing increasing geopolitical risks and may find it more challenging to balance their self-interest with national interests. If corporations primarily exist to generate profit (White, 2015), future research could examine the scope of private sector involvement in public-private partnerships, as well as how such engagements vary by region and industry, and their potential impact on public diplomacy.

Another important question is whether expanding public-private partnerships in public diplomacy is desirable. In evaluating the desirability of private sector engagement in public diplomacy, the advantages cited most often relate to efficiency, expertise, credibility, and

cost, while the disadvantages most often noted pertain to control, accountability, and mission (Fitzpatrick, 2009). Given President Trump's second term's priorities, it can only be assumed that this administration may see favorably an increased contribution of the private sector in protecting and promoting U.S. interests abroad. For instance, in a newsletter that marked *100 Days of an America First State Department*, the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio noted that the Department has struggled to perform basic diplomatic functions because the problem is "a system where everything takes too much time, costs too much money, involves too many individuals, and all too often ends up failing the American people." Because of this, "the State Department is becoming a leaner machine, eager to deliver for the taxpayers...by consolidating offices, eliminating bureaucracy, and ensuring a culture where the State Department's many talented voices can be heard, our impending reorganization will leave the United States with a foreign policy that is less expensive and more effective" (Rubio, 2025). As the transition period passes, this new mindset may yield creative and innovative solutions where private sector engagement in public diplomacy may continue to be desirable.

Since this study illustrates the U.S. government's efforts to engage with the private sector, it would be useful to know what motivates U.S. multinational corporations to respond and engage directly in government efforts to advance public diplomacy objectives or to participate in public-private diplomatic partnerships with governments (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

This study offers important implications for collaborations in public diplomacy between U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations. Findings show the U.S. government is seeking the U.S. corporate sectors' attention both within and beyond borders. The United States' adherence to the United Nations' Sustainable Development agenda offers both the government and corporate sector a sphere of shared interests and goals for international collaborations. Within this framework, some multinational corporations are engaged in U.S. public diplomacy public-private partnerships intentionally, while others seek to achieve objectives that are contributing to some public diplomacy goals unintentionally.

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