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Communications

The tensions and frustrations evident at December's World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai should serve as a wake up call to U.S. policymakers, Ambassador David A. Gross warns. In a shrinking world constantly more affected by internet connections, U.S. leadership is more important than ever and it will demand from Americans heightened standards of vision and integrity.

Walking the Talk: The Role of U.S. Leadership in the Wake of WCIT

BY DAVID A. GROSS

During the past month, more has been written about December's World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), hosted by the United Nation's International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Dubai, than about any previous international telecoms treaty conference. And for good reason. Despite the fact that the nominal focus of the conference was to bring up-to-date a 1988 telecommunications treaty regarding traditional international telecoms services, countries such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, China and others sought to use the gathering to establish new international rules through the ITU governing the internet. Although many believe that WCIT failed because 55 countries—including the United States, virtually all of Europe, and other internet-leading countries such as Kenya and India—did not sign the revised treaty, in reality WCIT was an important early chapter in the critical global process of determining the internet's political and policy future—and in turn, its technical and economic future.

It is important to recognize that the internet's political and policy future will be shaped by American leadership—not just through traditional U.S. rhetoric about competition, private sector leadership, and

“multi-stakeholder” decisionmaking, but by America's ability to “walk the talk” by showing unequivocally that the ideals we preach internationally are fully reflected in what we do at home.

American policymakers recognize that what we do domestically is watched and analyzed with great care by much of the rest of the world. For example, before the WCIT negotiations began in Dubai, Congress unanimously passed resolutions on internet governance that stated that “the United States should continue to preserve and advance the multi-stakeholder governance model under which the Internet has thrived as well as resist the imposition of an International Telecommunication Union (ITU) mandated international settlement regime on the Internet.” Declaring, among other things, that “it is essential that the Internet remain stable, secure, and free from government control.”

Congress's Clear Message Was Heard. This action was important not only because of the substance of Congress's statements, but also because the world understood just how extraordinary it is for our Congress to act with unanimity, especially in an era when Congress has immense difficulty reaching consensus on almost anything. At the end of WCIT, I heard from many foreign officials that they knew that the United States would not sign the revised treaty with its Internet-related provisions because Congress had sent a clear and unequivocal message that such an agreement was unacceptable to the American people.

Looking ahead, we must recognize the obvious—internet policy issues affect virtually everyone in the world, and U.S. leadership depends on the power of its forward looking arguments, not just the historical fact

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that the United States gave the world a transformational technology. Although establishing global internet policy will be long, complex and challenging, we are fortunate that we have a well-established road map to follow.

No Room for Hypocrisy. We can continue to lead the world toward greater prosperity and the socially transformational benefits long associated with the internet.

But if we fail to match our words with action; if we insist that others avoid an approach that imposes regulations and laws that limit the internet's capacity to advance freedom, openness and creativity, micromanages markets, or limits competition and investment, but do otherwise at home, then the world will quickly recognize our hypocrisy.