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NOTE FOR THE SECRETARY

FROM: S/SAIT – Alec Ross

SUBJECT: Disruptions that will impact your remaining tenure

Two years ago, we had a meeting in which we discussed how technology would disrupt the conduct of our foreign policy, for both good and ill. Looking back, some of the predictions I made, which many thought a little crazy, proved true:

- Technology/social media would devolve power from governments and large institutions to individuals and small institutions, enabling almost leaderless political movements. We saw this with Tunisia and Egypt, and now in Syria.
- Powerful “virtual organizations” would emerge with globally distributed members and followers instead of paid staff, and a Web address instead of a street address. We saw this with Wikileaks.
- Internet-enabled cell phones would proliferate and become a central feature of global economic development. Since our conversation, the number of handsets worldwide has grown from 4 billion to 5 billion, with 75% of that growth in the developing world. Remarkably, there are now more cell phones in Africa than Europe.
- Authoritarian regimes would respond to increased Internet access by tightening restrictions on free expression and heightening surveillance for the purpose of squelching dissent. We see this throughout the Middle East, and much of the Caucasus and Southeast Asia.

Between now and January 2013, technology will continue to play a very disruptive role in the conduct of our foreign policy, again for both good and ill. Specifically, I predict the following:

- There will be technology-based breakthrough innovations in education and finance. Population segments (particularly women and girls) previously denied schooling or financial services will gain access. Networks do not manifest racial, gender or ethnic bias.

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- These new breakthrough innovations will create many new billionaires in the developing world. There will be several more “Mo Ibrahims” emerging in the next 18 months. Additionally, these developing-world innovations will strengthen the local workforces and increase the size of its middle class.
- Secretary Gates’ designation of cyber-space as a theater of war will be validated as nations build their defensive and offensive capabilities in a cyber-space arms race. Resulting asymmetries in capability will stress relations with emerging powers.
- Expanding Internet use in Muslim majority countries will routinely aggravate cross-cultural conflict (i.e. “draw Mohammed” day, Koran burning), injecting fringe American politics into foreign affairs.
- Political power will increasingly operate through regional and global youth cultures that share ideas and tactics through the Internet. Previously unknown political leaders and movements will emerge to challenge more established leaders.
- Response from autocratic states to the Arab Spring will be deep investment in control technologies for content restriction, surveillance, and cyber-attacks on opponents.
- Ubiquity of online data (government, finance, corporate, personal) plus citizen journalists armed with camera-enabled mobile phones will expose corruption that will elevate demands for good government.
- Advances in translation technologies will lower barriers for cross-cultural exchange, education, and scientific cooperation.
- Ad hoc hacker organizations (like the “anonymous” group which attacked Amazon and PayPal post Wikileaks) will increase in number and sophistication, and will successfully disrupt a Western government.

I believe your remaining time as Secretary of State will continue with technology-fueled disruptive change. The measure of the Department’s success in the face of this change will be the creativity, speed and flexibility of our responses. As Clarence Darrow said, “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

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