

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074  
MINORITY (202) 225-5051

<https://oversight.house.gov>

August 7, 2024

Mr. John Podesta  
Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Podesta:

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is continuing its investigation into the activities of the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC). On March 13, 2024, I wrote the State Department seeking information regarding your transition to assume SPEC office responsibilities in lieu of former Special Envoy John Kerry's announced resignation.<sup>1</sup> The Department has since released documents and communications regarding your transition to serve as Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy—and the released information supports concerns that the Biden Administration has taken steps to avoid the Senate confirmation process and to cloud transparency of the SPEC office's activities. Because we are aware of significant confusion across the Department related to your transition to your new role, we require your participation in a transcribed interview to examine your involvement in SPEC-related matters.

The Department explicitly informed us that your new role “is not a replacement for SPEC, and the State Department will continue to lead international climate diplomacy, including negotiations, for the United States.”<sup>2</sup> Department correspondence surrounding the announcement of former Special Envoy Kerry's departure<sup>3</sup> and internal Department emails which contain subject lines labeled: “Podesta is new envoy,”<sup>4</sup> clearly contradict the claim that you are not replacing former Special Envoy Kerry.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Anthony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Mar. 13, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Naz Durakoğlu, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Legislative Affairs, Dep't of State, to James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (Apr. 2, 2024).

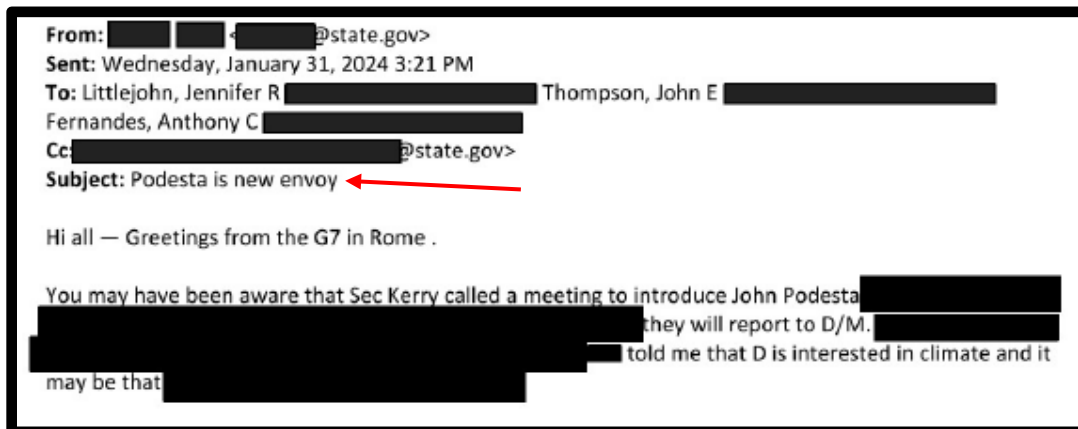
<sup>3</sup> Dep't of State production to the H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (June 24, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000023

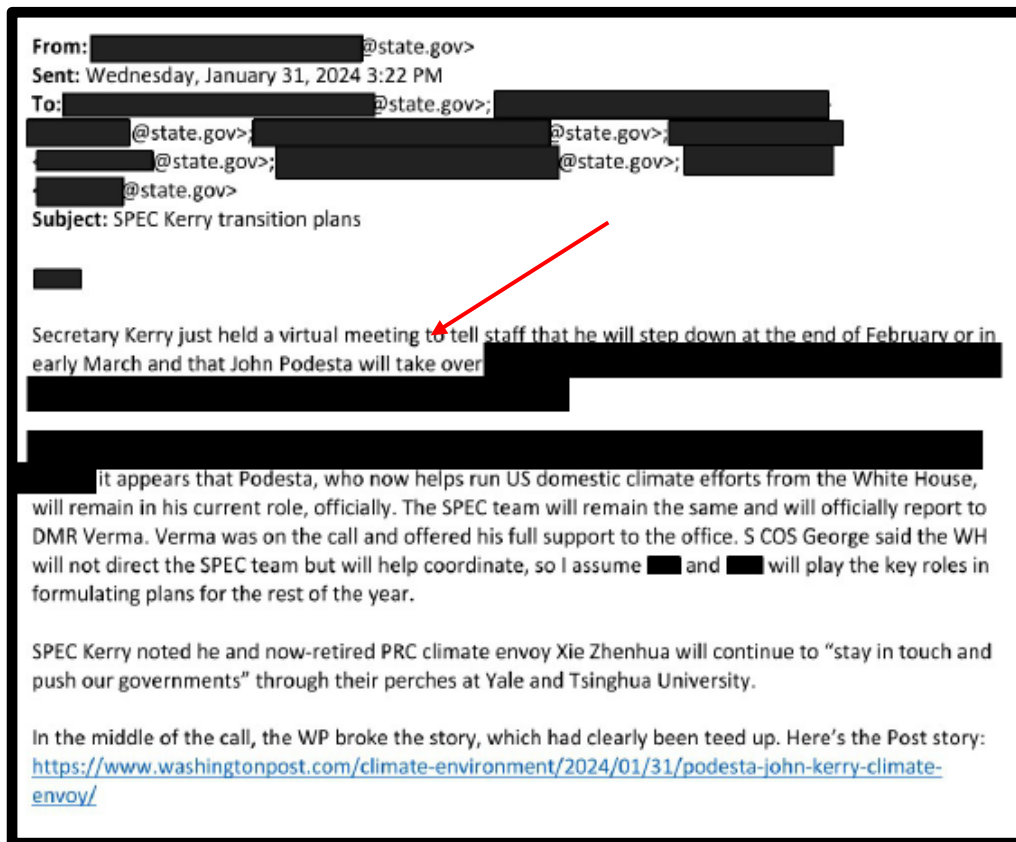
Mr. John Podesta

August 7, 2024

Page 2 of 6



Further, former Envoy Kerry informed Department staff that “[you] will take over” when he planned to step down from SPEC Envoy earlier this year.<sup>5</sup>



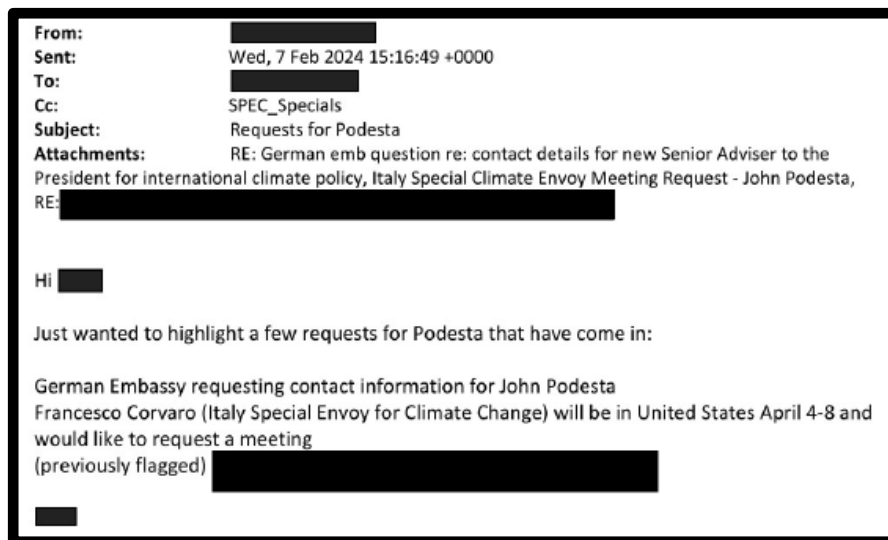
Notably, according to Department correspondence, former Envoy Kerry “noted he and now-retired [People’s Republic of China] climate envoy Xie Zhenhua will continue to ‘stay in touch and push [their] governments’ through their perches at Yale and Tsinghua University.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000032.

<sup>6</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000032.

Not only does this correspondence heighten the concerns raised in my letter to the Department about the threat of the Chinese Communist Party’s political warfare and the role of high-ranking Department officials in combatting that threat,<sup>7</sup> but also highlights that, despite resigning, former Envoy Kerry appears to continue practicing international diplomacy as a private citizen without oversight from Department Secretary Antony Blinken, Congress, and perhaps most glaringly, President Biden—unless pressuring governments is a part of former Envoy Kerry’s campaign duties.<sup>8</sup> A transcribed interview will assist the Committee in understanding the coordination you maintain with former Envoy Kerry in your new role, and how he appears to be continuing his work with the SPEC office, despite “stepping down.”<sup>9</sup>

Though the Department insists that you are not a one-to-one replacement for former Envoy Kerry,<sup>10</sup> it appears, at least for international diplomacy purposes, to be business as usual with regard to interaction and coordination with the international countries’ SPEC-equivalents. Department correspondence reveals outreach by other countries including Germany,<sup>11</sup> Italy,<sup>12</sup> Greece,<sup>13</sup> and Japan<sup>14</sup>—all seeking your information just as they surely sought that of former Envoy Kerry, as their respective counterpart. The following correspondence contains requests of German and Italian officials to connect with you.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (May 6, 2024), at 7.

<sup>8</sup> See Zack Colman, *Kerry plans pivot to campaigning for Biden*, E&E NEWS (Jan. 16, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000083.

<sup>10</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000009.

<sup>11</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000022.

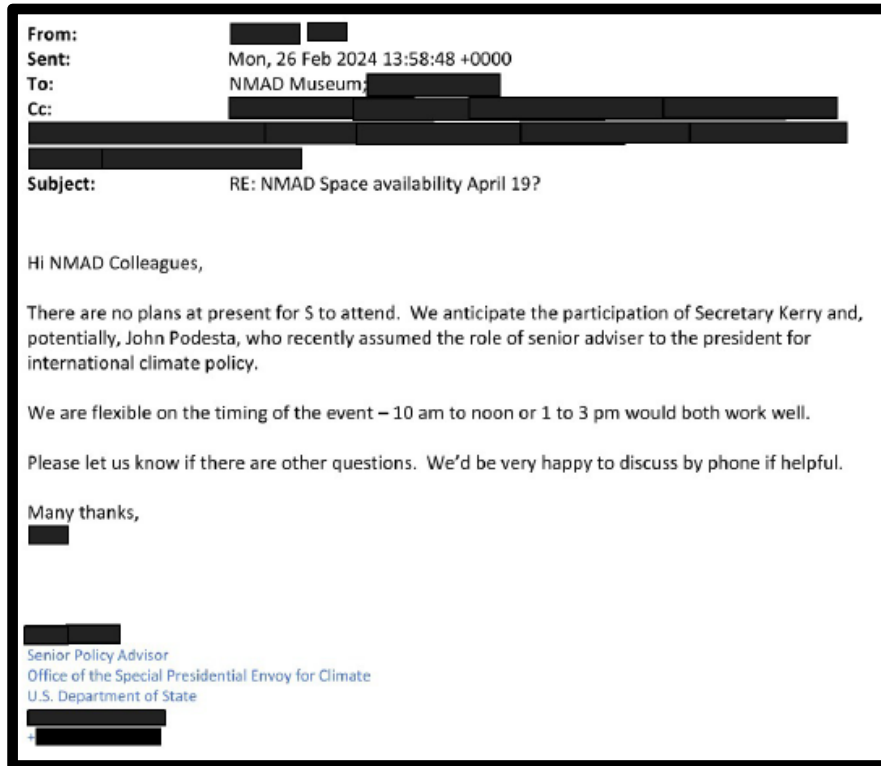
<sup>12</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000020.

<sup>13</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000081.

<sup>14</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000061.

<sup>15</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000019.

Additionally, we also understand you are now invited to Department-hosted events at the National Museum of American Diplomacy, a museum owned and operated by the Department honoring the history of American diplomacy, with your predecessor to possibly meet an individual identified as “S”.<sup>16</sup>



The use of shady identifiers and fake names appears to be a consistent ethical failure in this Administration intent on hiding its actions from the American people. The use of the term “S,” above is a clear continuation of SPEC office methods to conceal interactions with certain entities and individuals, such as former Envoy’s Kerry’s off-the-record meetings with members of leftist environmental groups dubbed collectively as the “Kitchen Cabinet” in documents produced to the Committee.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, we understand former Envoy Kerry is under investigation for his lack of compliance with federal records laws and regulations related to official email communications, and for whether communications identified by his email “SESTravel1@state.gov” have been withheld from responses to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000040.

<sup>17</sup> Documents on file with Comm. staff; *See* Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Jan. 5, 2024); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Feb. 7, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Charles Grassley, Ranking Member, S. Comm. on the Budget, and Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, S. Comm. on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, to Antony J.

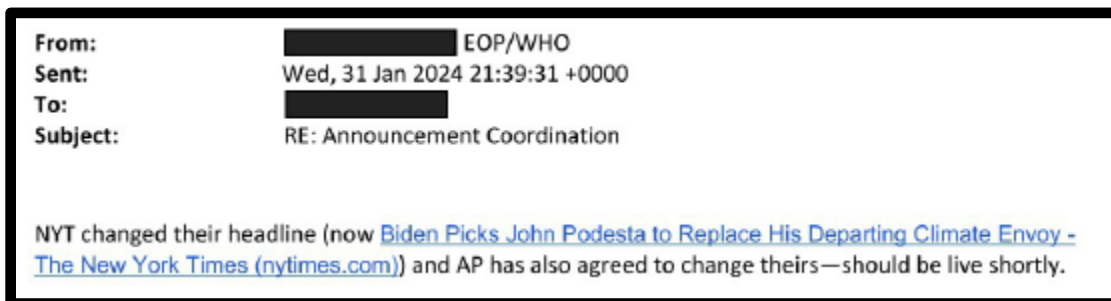
Mr. John Podesta

August 7, 2024

Page 5 of 6

In line with the Committee’s stated concerns that “the State Department and the White House will deliberately complicate future congressional oversight requests on the grounds that [you] [are] simultaneously a White House employee and a State Department leader,”<sup>19</sup> the Department referred the Committee to the White House for additional information about your new role,<sup>20</sup> despite your position appearing intimately integrated with the Department. Documents produced to the Committee reveal that you “will provide leadership via coordination, not directional.”<sup>21</sup> In a briefing provided to Committee staff, the Department explained that SPEC staff attend meetings with you on a case-by-case basis,<sup>22</sup> which upon review of Department documents released to the Committee, happens frequently.<sup>23</sup> The Department and the White House have taken great care to explain the nuance in messaging to media outlets, foreign entities, and inter-Department offices that you have “coordination leadership” but not “directional leadership” of the SPEC office. This distinction appears unnecessary to the Committee.

The Department provided the White House specified language in redacted “press guidance,” to hide your involvement at SPEC.<sup>24</sup> The White House even pressured the *New York Times* and the *Associated Press* to change their headlines to reflect a rigid set of parameters for describing your transition to your new role.<sup>25</sup>



Lastly, the Committee has raised concerns that upon your elevation to assume duties nearly identical to those of former SPEC Envoy Kerry, the Biden Administration has taken steps “to evade application of the law requiring a special envoy to be Senate confirmed.”<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding the fact you have remained in the White House and are not a Department

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Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (June 17, 2024), available at

[https://www.grassley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/grassley\\_johnson\\_to\\_state\\_-\\_kerry\\_emails.pdf](https://www.grassley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/grassley_johnson_to_state_-_kerry_emails.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Anthony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Mar. 13, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Naz Durakoğlu, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Legislative Affairs, Dep’t of State, to James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (Apr. 2, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000058

<sup>22</sup> Dep’t Briefing to Committee Staff (May 1, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Dep’t of State production to the H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (June 24, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000029.

<sup>25</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000028

<sup>26</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Anthony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Mar. 13, 2024).

Mr. John Podesta  
August 7, 2024  
Page 6 of 6

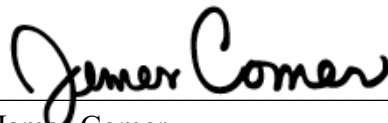
employee, like former Envoy Kerry,<sup>27</sup> we maintain that your top climate diplomat status and close integration with the Department should subject you to the requirement of Senate confirmation under Section 5105 of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Your role as Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy appears to “[exercise] significant authority pursuant to the laws of the United States”<sup>28</sup> while coordinating with Department—i.e., relying on its staff resources, contacting other countries’ SPEC-equivalents, attending meetings with Former Envoy Kerry, engaging with United States Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>29</sup> Given the unprecedented nature of your role’s coordination with the Department and use of its staff resources, your utilization and expenditure of Department resources likely constitute a misuse of appropriated funds.<sup>30</sup>

The Biden Administration has taken affirmative actions to obfuscate oversight of the SPEC office by elevating you as a Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy, thereby insulating your new role. We believe that you have information that will assist us fully in understanding the coordination you maintain with both the Department and former Envoy Kerry on SPEC-related matters. We therefore request that you make yourself available voluntarily for a transcribed interview.

To schedule the transcribed interview or ask any related follow-up questions, please contact the Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority Staff at (202) 225-5074 no later than August 14, 2024.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate, “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



James Comer

Chairman

Committee on Oversight and Accountability

cc: The Honorable Jamie B. Raskin, Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Accountability

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<sup>27</sup> Email correspondence from Justin Oswald, White House Office of Legislative Affairs, to H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability staff (Feb. 5, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 5105, 135 Stat. 2346 (2021).

<sup>29</sup> See STATE-2024-0004-0000036 - STATE-2024-0004-0000039.

<sup>30</sup> See 31 U.S.C. §1301(a).