



CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a vital tool in contemporary international relations, facilitating dialogue, projecting national identity, and fostering soft power through the exchange of ideas, values, and cultural expressions. In the 21st century, its role has expanded due to globalization, digital transformation, and increasing multipolarity. This article examined the evolution, strategic uses, and ethical challenges of cultural diplomacy. Drawing on historical foundations, contemporary case studies, and critical theory, the article explored how states and non-state actors deploy culture in diplomatic efforts, highlighting both achievements and tensions. While cultural diplomacy promotes mutual understanding and global engagement, it also risks instrumentalization, cultural imperialism, and politicization. The article argued for a more ethical, inclusive, and dialogical practice that respects diversity and empowers marginalized voices. In doing so, it offers a framework for rethinking cultural diplomacy as a cornerstone of peaceful coexistence and global citizenship in a divided world.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy as the use of cultural exchange and expression to foster mutual understanding and advance foreign trust, in policy goals has become increasingly prominent in the 21st century. As traditional diplomacy faces new limitations in a rapidly changing global environment, states and non-state actors alike have turned to culture as a means of building influencing global narratives, and facilitating dialogue across political, ideological, and geographic divides. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which often takes place behind closed doors, cultural diplomacy engages publics directly and offers a less confrontational, more relational means of fostering international ties.

Globalization, technological advancement, and the rise of multipolar power centers have intensified interest in soft power: the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Culture, as a key element of soft power, plays a central role in shaping a country's image, generating goodwill, and creating long-term partnerships. Cultural diplomacy thus, operates not only as a supplement to economic or political diplomacy but also as a primary channel for building sustainable international relationships.¹

This article critically explored the evolution and strategic deployment of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century. It begins with a historical overview, then analyzes contemporary practices through key case studies. It also addresses ethical dilemmas and challenges, such as, cultural imperialism, representation, and digital risks—and concludes with recommendations for more equitable and inclusive cultural diplomacy. Through this analysis, the article contends that cultural diplomacy must be re-imagined not only as an instrument of influence but as a vehicle for shared humanity, dialogue, and global solidarity.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

In order to establish a solid foundation for this study, it is essential to clarify the core concepts: culture, diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. These terms are often conflated in public discourse, yet they hold distinct meanings in the realm of international relations and cultural studies.

Culture refers to the shared values, traditions, customs, artistic expressions, and ways of life that shape the identity of a group of people. It is both tangible that is expressed through artifacts, institutions, and language, and intangible, comprising beliefs, worldviews, and social norms.²

¹ Nye J.S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs 2004

² Geertz C. *The Temptation of Cultures*. Basic Books 1973

Culture is dynamic, evolving as societies interact with one another and adapt to internal and external influences.

Diplomacy, in its classical sense, is the art and practice of managing relations between states through negotiation, dialogue, and representation ³. Traditionally carried out by professional diplomats in formal settings, diplomacy has broadened in the twenty-first century to encompass a wider range of actors and forms, including economic diplomacy, environmental diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. This expansion reflects the growing complexity of international affairs and the recognition that states must engage not only governments but also foreign publics.

Cultural Diplomacy represents the intersection of these two concepts. It is the use of culture: whether through arts, education, language, heritage or as an instrument of foreign policy and international engagement. Cultural diplomacy goes beyond mere cultural exchange, which may occur informally or without state involvement, by deliberately linking cultural initiatives to strategic diplomatic objectives⁴. Cultural diplomacy is “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding”⁵. In practice, it involves activities such as international cultural festivals, academic exchange programs, museum collaborations, and media outreach, all of which contribute to building trust and soft power.

It is also important to distinguish cultural diplomacy from the broader notion of soft power. Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather

³ Berridge G.R. *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. (6th ed). Palgrave Macmillan 2015

⁴ Mark S., *A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy*. Clingendael Institute 2009

⁵ Cummings M.C. *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*. Center of Arts and Culture 2003

than coercion or payment⁶. Cultural diplomacy is thus one of the principal tools through which soft power is exercised, allowing states to project a favorable image, strengthen international relationships, and promote long-term cooperation.

For the purpose of this study, cultural diplomacy will be understood as the intentional use of cultural resources and exchanges by states and other actors to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, and influence in the international system. This conceptual framework provides the lens through which its purpose and relevance in the twenty-first century will be examined.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural diplomacy is grounded in a wide range of international and national legal instruments that provide legitimacy, regulate conduct, and promote cultural cooperation among states. These frameworks ensure that cultural engagement is not merely an informal practice but part of the broader system of international law and policy.

International Frameworks

The United Nations Charter (1945),⁷ establishes the foundation for international cooperation in culture and education. Article 1(3) explicitly identifies the promotion of cultural and educational collaboration as one of the UN's objectives, thereby giving cultural diplomacy a legal mandate (United Nations, Charter). Similarly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) enshrines cultural participation as a basic human right. Article 27 affirms that "everyone has the

⁶ Nye J.S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs 2004

⁷ United Nations: Charter of the United Nations 1945

right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement”.⁸

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) reinforces this principle by obliging states to respect the right to take part in cultural life, as stated in Article 15 (UN General Assembly). This places cultural engagement within the broader framework of international human rights law.

UNESCO conventions further strengthen the legal framework for cultural diplomacy. Key instruments include the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005). Collectively, these conventions protect cultural assets, encourage cultural diversity, and promote cross-border collaboration⁹ (UNESCO, World Heritage Convention; UNESCO, Intangible Heritage Convention; UNESCO, Cultural Expressions Convention).

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), though primarily concerned with diplomatic privileges and immunities, indirectly supports cultural diplomacy by institutionalizing cultural attachés and cultural sections in embassies.¹⁰

Regional Frameworks

Regional organizations have also developed charters and conventions that support cultural diplomacy. The European Cultural Convention (1954) under the Council of Europe obliges

⁸ United Nations: Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948

⁹ UNESCO, Intangible Heritage Convention; Convention for the Safeguarding of the intangible Cultural Heritage 1972 and Cultural Expressions Convention: Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005.

¹⁰ Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations 1961

member states to foster cultural cooperation and exchanges.¹¹ In Africa, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) recognizes the right of individuals and communities to cultural development and identity in Articles 17 and 22.¹² Similar provisions are embedded in instruments of other regional bodies, such as the Organization of American States and ASEAN.

National Frameworks

At the national level, many countries have developed policies and legislation to institutionalize cultural diplomacy. For instance, Nigeria's National Cultural Policy (1988, revised 2022) emphasizes cultural heritage and international cultural exchange as tools of national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria). Likewise, institutions such as the British Council (UK), Goethe-Institut (Germany), and Alliance Française (France) are established under national legal frameworks to advance cultural diplomacy through education, arts, and language promotion.¹³

In summary, the legal framework for cultural diplomacy rests on international human rights law, UNESCO conventions, regional charters, and national cultural policies. These instruments provide both the normative and regulatory foundations necessary for states and non-state actors to engage in cultural diplomacy, while safeguarding cultural diversity and heritage.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural diplomacy is a form of soft power. It is the strategic exchange and promotion of a country's culture to build mutual understanding, foster relationships and support national and international goals. It goes beyond formal policies, focusing on people-to-people connections through shared cultural elements. It involves sharing ideas, information, art, language and other

¹¹ Council of Europe: European Cultural Convention 1954

¹² Organization of African Unity: African Charter on Human and People's Rights. Nairobi 1981.

¹³ Bound et al. Cultural Diplomacy 2007 p15

cultural expressions to shape positive perception and create influence through attraction rather than coercion.¹⁴

Cultural diplomacy has long been an integral, albeit often understated, component of international relations. Its roots can be traced to ancient civilizations where artistic exchange, religious missions, and language diffusion played a role in diplomacy and imperial outreach. From Greco-Roman exchanges and Islamic intellectual networks to the missionary and colonial engagements of the early modern period, cultural contact has always accompanied political and economic interaction.

In the modern era, cultural diplomacy evolved alongside the emergence of nation-states and formal foreign ministries. During the 19th century, European powers increasingly used culture to legitimize imperial expansion. France, for instance, institutionalized the global promotion of its language and arts through the Alliance Française (founded in 1883), aiming to strengthen its influence in colonies and beyond. Similarly, Britain's British Council (founded in 1934) and Germany's Goethe-Institut (1951), were established to promote national culture as a form of soft engagement and ideological counterweight.¹⁵

The 20th century witnessed the institutionalization of cultural diplomacy as a state practice, particularly during the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a cultural arms race—sponsoring art exhibitions, student exchanges, radio broadcasts, and orchestral tours—as they competed for global hearts and minds. American initiatives such as the *Fulbright Program* and the *US Information Agency* (USIA) sought to promote liberal democratic values

¹⁴ 'Cultural Diplomacy' www.culturaldiplomacy.org Accessed June 22nd 2025

¹⁵ R.T Arndt. *The First Resort of Kings: American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*. (Potomac Books 2005)

abroad, while the USSR promoted socialist realism and sent ballet troupes and film delegations across the Global South¹⁶

After the Cold War, with the decline of ideological polarization, cultural diplomacy was increasingly reframed as a means of promoting mutual understanding and global cooperation. In the wake of 9/11, governments around the world recognized culture's potential to counter extremism, reduce tensions, and support development goals. Institutions like UNESCO and the European Union began to foreground cultural cooperation as a pillar of diplomacy, emphasizing intercultural dialogue, cultural rights, and heritage preservation.¹⁷

In the 21st century, the rise of soft power discourse, global media, and digital platforms has elevated cultural diplomacy to new prominence. States, cities, corporations, and diasporas now engage in cultural outreach not only to advance political goals but to shape identity, build trust, and influence public opinion across borders. Thus, cultural diplomacy has become both more strategic and more complex—requiring careful negotiation between authenticity and utility, power and partnership

STRATEGIC APPLICATIONS AND CASE STUDIES OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

1. National Branding and Soft Power Projection

Countries like South Korea have employed cultural diplomacy to project national identity and cultivate soft power. The Korean Wave (Hallyu), encompassing K-pop, film, and cuisine, has transformed South Korea's global image. With state support, initiatives such as KOCIS have

¹⁶ Cull N.J. *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy 1945-1989* (Cambridge UP 2008) www.cambridge.org Accessed May 3rd 2025

¹⁷ Isar Y.R. (ed) *Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest*. (Sage 2010)

professionalized Korea's cultural export strategy (Kim 2011). Japan, similarly, uses its traditional arts and anime culture, often via the Japan Foundation, to engage foreign audiences.

2. Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding

Cultural diplomacy also contributes to post-conflict reconciliation. In the Balkans, cultural heritage restoration under UNESCO's guidance has symbolized reconciliation. Rwanda's use of storytelling and artistic initiatives post-genocide underscores culture's power to heal. Colombia's artistic peace routes are further examples of creative engagement in post-conflict zones.

3. Educational and Academic Diplomacy

Academic Diplomacy strengthens connections between nations through higher education, research and educational exchange. It leverages the strengths of universities and research institutions to achieve foreign policy goals and foster goodwill. This approach creates opportunities for people to communicate, collaborate and learn from each other, even when their governments may disagree. While student exchange programs are important, academic diplomacy encompasses joint efforts on climate change, combating pandemics, developing new technologies and forming educational partnerships across countries. Today, academic diplomacy is more critical than ever, this is because it fosters relationships rooted in a fundamental goal: the pursuit of truth and understanding. Established in classrooms and laboratories, these connections are remarkably resilient, surviving political crises that may sever ties. Considering the global challenges we face: pandemics, climate change, energy transitions and the ethics of artificial intelligence. No single nation possesses the answers. Academic diplomacy provides the platform to unite the brightest minds from diverse backgrounds. This collaboration fuels innovation, allows for the sharing of crucial knowledge and helps build a more prosperous and sustainable

future together. Moreover, it serves as a powerful form of “soft power” when a country welcomes international students and researchers, it highlights its intellectual vibrancy and cultural richness, these individuals often return to their home countries with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their host nation, transforming into informal ambassadors.¹⁸ Educational exchanges such as Fulbright (U.S.), Chevening (UK), and Erasmus+ (EU) build long-term relationships and influence. China’s Confucius Institutes serve similar functions, though they have raised concerns about ideological influence.¹⁹ The German Academic Exchange Service known as DAAD is a state funded organization dedicated to advancing international academic relations, this exemplifies a non-intrusive model of intercultural academic cooperation.

4. City and Subnational Diplomacy

In an increasingly interconnected world, the traditional Westphalian model of diplomacy, which views states as the primary actors in international relations, is being complemented by the emergence of cities, regions and other subnational entities as significant players in global diplomacy. Known as “city diplomacy” or subnational diplomacy,” this trend reflects a shift where local governments engage internationally to promote local interests, address global challenges and fosters partnerships. It signifies the evolving dynamics of global governance, where non-state actors address transnational issues such as climate change, migration, economic development and public health. Historically, diplomacy was exclusively the domain of sovereign states, with national governments representing their countries in international affairs. However, the complexity of global challenges and the increasing importance of local governance, have

¹⁸ Academic Diplomacy www.diplomacy.edu Accessed June 22nd 2025

¹⁹ Paradise J.F. “China and International Harmony: The Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing’s Soft Power” Asian Survey (2009) (49)(4)647-667

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catalyzed the rise of city and subnational diplomacy. This shift began in the late 20th century, as cities became more involved in international networks and initiatives, accelerating further in the 21st century due to globalization and urbanization. Cities have become central hubs of economic, cultural, and political activity, often at the forefront of addressing challenges like climate change and migration. Urbanization has highlighted their pivotal role in global solutions.²⁰ Cities like Barcelona, Nairobi, and Istanbul act as cultural diplomats, hosting international festivals and forming cultural city networks. These efforts often reflect a city's values. Barcelona, for instance, aligns its cultural identity with openness and democracy.²¹ City diplomacy is reshaping international relations by demonstrating the critical role of local governments in addressing global issues. While this trend presents challenges, the growing importance of cities and regions in global governance underscores their potential to foster inclusive, responsive and effective solutions. As the world confronts complex challenges, the influence of city and subnational diplomacy is set to expand, making it an indispensable element of modern international relations.

5. Digital and Diaspora Diplomacy

Digital diaspora diplomacy harnesses digital tools and platforms to engage, mobilize and collaborate with diaspora communities worldwide. It blends two diplomatic strategies: Digital Diplomacy which uses social media, websites, apps, and online campaigns to further foreign policy goals. While Diaspora Diplomacy engages emigrant populations to promote cultural ties, economic investment, advocacy and homeland relations. Together, they enable governments and diaspora to stay connected, influence narratives, coordinate activities and support national objectives via the internet.

²⁰ Chkuaseli S. 'City and Subnational Diplomacy: The Rise of Local Actors in Global Affairs' www.document.pub Accessed September 1st 2024.

²¹ M. Acuto. *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy: The Urban Link* (Routledge 2013)

India's Digital India and Incredible India campaigns, leverage culture digitally to engage global audiences.²² Diasporas, too, play a major role: Nigerian, Lebanese, and African diaspora communities serve as informal diplomats, shaping perceptions and building bridges through festivals, media, and remittances.

Digital and Diaspora Diplomacy summarily, is the strategic use of digital platforms to foster meaningful engagement between governments and their diaspora populations. It enables real-time communication, narrative influence and cooperative programs even across time zones and continents. While it offers fresh diplomatic leverage, it also demands digital savvy, credible engagement, and proactive management of online risks.

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

I. Instrumentalization and Loss of Authenticity

When cultural diplomacy is reduced to public relations or propaganda, it risks undermining authenticity and artistic integrity.²³ Culture should inspire genuine dialogue and not be manipulated for political ends.

II. Power Asymmetries and Cultural Imperialism

Powerful nations dominate cultural flows, risking neo-imperialist influence. Critics warn that cultural diplomacy may replicate Western norms under the guise of universal values.²⁴

²² D.K. Thassu. *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. (Palmgrave Macmillan, 2013)

²³ Mark, S. "A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy". Discussion Papers in Diplomacy no.114 Clingendael Institute 2010

²⁴ Said, E.W. *Culture and Imperialism*. (Vintage Books, 1993) Tomlinson, J. *Globalization and Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1999)

III. Politicization and Diplomatic Tensions

Institutions like Confucius Institutes, have been accused of political agendas, leading to closures and mistrust.²⁵ Cultural diplomacy, must carefully balance openness and national security concerns.

IV. Representation and Marginalization

National cultural narratives often exclude minority voices. Ethical diplomacy must reflect cultural pluralism and inclusivity.²⁶

V. Digital Disinformation

Digital tools can amplify cultural reach, but they also pose risks like: misinformation, appropriation, and digital echo chambers threaten the credibility of cultural engagement.

CONCLUSION

Cultural diplomacy in the 21st century reflects both the enduring power of cultural expression and the evolving nature of global interaction. As soft power becomes increasingly significant in a multipolar world, cultural diplomacy offers a way to bridge divides, foster trust, and promote peace through shared values and creativity. Yet, this promise must be tempered by critical awareness. Cultural diplomacy should not be reduced to state branding or propaganda. It must strive for authenticity, ethical representation, and genuine engagement. As new actors including cities, diasporas, and digital influencers enter the diplomatic arena, the practice must become more inclusive and dialogical.

²⁵ Brady, A. *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield 2015

²⁶ A.A, Mazrui. *Cultural Forces in World Politics*. (James Currey, 1990)

The future of cultural diplomacy lies in its ability to listen as much as to speak, to embrace diversity rather than impose homogeneity, and to build global relationships that are respectful, participatory, and just. In an era marked by global crises, rising nationalism, and cultural polarization, cultural diplomacy can offer not just influence but hope.

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