

THE CHANGING NATURE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: FROM STATE REPRESENTATION TO STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

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Abstract: Although cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly prominent concept in contemporary international relations, its theoretical boundaries remain blurred. The growing body of literature reflects a wide range of interpretations, often overlapping with related concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy, international cultural relations, and strategic communication. This conceptual diversity has contributed to the expanding use of the term in both academic research and foreign policy practice while simultaneously raising questions regarding its definition, scope, analytical distinctiveness, and evolving role within contemporary international relations.

Against this background, the paper examines the conceptual evolution of cultural diplomacy and its changing position within contemporary international relations theory. Rather than providing a purely historical overview, it analyses the principal theoretical debates that have shaped the concept and explores how the transformation of power in contemporary international relations has contributed to redefining the role and functions of cultural diplomacy. The paper argues that the absence of a universally accepted definition should not be interpreted merely as a conceptual weakness. Instead, it reflects the dynamic nature of international relations and the continuous adaptation of diplomatic practice to evolving political, technological, societal, and geopolitical environments.

Particular attention is devoted to the transition of cultural diplomacy from a predominantly state-centred instrument of cultural exchange towards a multidimensional framework involving non-state actors, digital platforms, transnational cultural networks, and new forms of international engagement. In this context, cultural diplomacy increasingly extends beyond the promotion of national culture and international image, incorporating functions related to dialogue, trust-building, mutual understanding, international cooperation, resilience, and the strengthening of democratic and societal resilience in response to contemporary geopolitical and security challenges.

The paper concludes that the evolution of cultural diplomacy mirrors the broader transformation of power in contemporary international relations as well as the changing nature of today's international and security environment. As influence increasingly depends on legitimacy, credibility, communication, trust, and cultural attractiveness rather than material capabilities alone, cultural diplomacy continues to develop as an evolving analytical concept with growing relevance for both foreign policy theory and practice. By revisiting the principal theoretical debates surrounding its development, the paper contributes to a more coherent understanding of the changing role of cultural diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Public diplomacy, International relations, Contemporary diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international environment has undergone profound transformation over the past decades, reshaping the ways in which states exercise influence, pursue foreign policy objectives, and interact with foreign publics. While military and economic capabilities continue to represent important sources of power, globalization, digitalization, technological development, and intensified geopolitical competition have significantly increased the importance of intangible resources, including values, ideas, culture, communication, and credibility. In this evolving environment, diplomacy itself has expanded beyond its traditional state-centric and government-to-government character, incorporating new actors, new communication channels, and new forms of international engagement.

Within this broader transformation, cultural diplomacy has gained renewed academic and political relevance (Grincheva, 2023). This renewed attention reflects not only the growing recognition of culture as a source of international influence but also the increasing complexity of contemporary diplomatic practice, where cities, civil society organisations, cultural institutions, and other non-state actors play an increasingly visible role alongside governments (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2023). As a result, cultural diplomacy is no longer understood solely as a state-driven foreign policy instrument but as a broader framework of international engagement involving multiple actors, governance levels, and forms of cultural interaction.

These developments have fundamentally altered both the expectations placed upon cultural diplomacy and the institutional environment in which it operates. During the Cold War, cultural diplomacy was primarily associated with ideological competition and the projection of national identity. Today, however, it operates within a significantly more complex international environment characterised by digital transformation, multipolarity, hybrid

threats, and growing competition over narratives, values, and international legitimacy. These developments have expanded both the expectations placed upon cultural diplomacy and the range of actors involved in its implementation.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in cultural diplomacy, its conceptual boundaries remain contested. Existing literature offers numerous definitions and theoretical interpretations, reflecting different disciplinary perspectives and analytical approaches. Rather than indicating conceptual inconsistency, this diversity reflects the dynamic evolution of cultural diplomacy in response to the transformation of international relations, diplomacy, and the nature of power itself. As international relations continue to evolve, so too do the functions, actors, and objectives associated with cultural diplomacy. Consequently, the concept can no longer be understood solely through its traditional role as an instrument of cultural exchange but must be analysed within the broader transformation of power, diplomacy, and international interaction in the twenty-first century.

Against this background, the present paper examines the changing nature of cultural diplomacy within contemporary international relations. It argues that the evolution of cultural diplomacy is not simply the result of conceptual refinement but reflects more fundamental changes in the international system, including the transformation of power, the emergence of new diplomatic actors, digital communication, and the changing nature of contemporary geopolitical and security challenges. By revisiting the principal theoretical debates surrounding cultural diplomacy, the paper seeks to explain why cultural diplomacy has evolved from a traditional instrument of state representation into a multidimensional framework of strategic international engagement.

The paper employs a qualitative conceptual approach based on the analysis and synthesis of the relevant academic literature. Rather than proposing a new definition of cultural diplomacy, it aims to examine the factors that have contributed to its conceptual evolution and to demonstrate why the diversity of contemporary interpretations should be understood as a reflection of the changing nature of international relations rather than as a weakness of the concept itself.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employs a concept-driven qualitative analysis to examine the theoretical evolution of cultural diplomacy within contemporary international relations. Rather than focusing on a particular national policy or empirical case, it explores the conceptual transformations that have shaped the changing role and functions of cultural diplomacy.

The paper is based on the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, including foundational works that have shaped the development of cultural diplomacy as an academic field, as well as recent studies addressing its contemporary transformations. Particular attention is devoted to examining the relationship between cultural diplomacy and related concepts, including soft power, public diplomacy, international cultural relations, strategic communication, democratic resilience, and the changing nature of diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

Since the paper is conceptual rather than empirical, the analytical process focuses on identifying recurring theoretical patterns across the literature rather than evaluating causal relationships. Particular attention is devoted to tracing the evolution of key concepts and examining how different theoretical traditions interpret the changing role of cultural diplomacy within contemporary international relations.

The paper combines conceptual analysis with a comparative examination of different theoretical approaches in order to identify both continuity and change in the understanding of cultural diplomacy. Rather than comparing individual national models, the analysis focuses on the evolution of the concept itself, examining how changes in the international environment—including globalization, digitalization, geopolitical competition, and the emergence of new international actors—have influenced its theoretical interpretation and practical application.

The paper follows an interdisciplinary approach by integrating perspectives from international relations, diplomacy studies, political science, communication studies, and cultural policy. Such an approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of cultural diplomacy as an evolving concept whose contemporary functions extend beyond traditional state representation and cultural exchange.

3. RESULTS

The Conceptual Evolution of Cultural Diplomacy

The conceptual evolution of cultural diplomacy reflects broader transformations in international relations, diplomacy, and the understanding of power. Although cultural diplomacy has long been recognised as a component of interstate relations, its meaning, functions, and objectives have expanded considerably over the past decades. Rather than representing a static concept with clearly defined boundaries, cultural diplomacy has continuously adapted to changing political, technological, and societal contexts, resulting in an increasingly diverse body of theoretical interpretations (Cummings, 2003; Mark, 2009).

Early approaches primarily understood cultural diplomacy as an instrument through which states promoted their national culture abroad in order to strengthen mutual understanding, improve bilateral relations, and foster peaceful international cooperation (Cummings, 2003). Within this traditional understanding, cultural diplomacy was largely associated with state-sponsored cultural exchanges, educational programmes, artistic cooperation, language promotion, and cultural institutions operating abroad. The state remained the principal actor responsible for designing and implementing cultural diplomacy, while culture itself represented the primary medium of international engagement.

The emergence of the concept of soft power significantly expanded this understanding. Nye (2004) argued that states increasingly achieve international influence not only through military or economic capabilities but also through attraction, credibility, and the ability to shape the preferences of others. Within this framework, culture became one of the principal sources of soft power, while cultural diplomacy gradually evolved from an instrument of cultural representation into a broader mechanism of strategic international influence. Consequently, the relationship between culture and foreign policy became increasingly integrated, positioning cultural diplomacy as an important component of contemporary diplomatic practice.

As scholarly debates continued to develop, cultural diplomacy became closely associated with a number of related concepts, including public diplomacy, international cultural relations, strategic communication, and international engagement (Cull, 2008; Melissen, 2005; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010). Rather than indicating theoretical inconsistency, this conceptual expansion reflects the changing nature of diplomacy itself. This conceptual broadening has also been reinforced by the growing convergence between cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations. Recent scholarship increasingly argues that contemporary cultural diplomacy can no longer be understood exclusively through the activities of national governments but should be analysed within broader frameworks of multilevel governance involving cities, cultural institutions, civil society organisations, and other non-state actors. This shift reflects the growing recognition that cultural interaction increasingly takes place through collaborative and network-based forms of international engagement, thereby challenging traditional state-centred understandings of cultural diplomacy (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2023). Together, these theoretical developments illustrate that the evolution of cultural diplomacy has been driven not by the replacement of earlier understandings but by their gradual expansion in response to changing international realities. Contemporary diplomacy increasingly involves multiple actors, multidirectional communication, digital interaction, and network-based forms of cooperation, all of which have contributed to redefining the theoretical boundaries of cultural diplomacy. At the same time, broader processes such as globalization, digitalization, and the emergence of new international actors further accelerated the conceptual evolution of cultural diplomacy, extending both its analytical scope and practical application.

From Cultural Representation to Strategic Influence

The conceptual transformation of cultural diplomacy has been accompanied by a significant expansion of its functions, actors, and instruments. While its traditional role was primarily associated with the international promotion of national culture and the strengthening of bilateral cultural relations, contemporary cultural diplomacy increasingly operates as a multidimensional framework of strategic international engagement. This transformation reflects broader structural changes within international relations, where influence is no longer derived solely from material capabilities but increasingly from communication, legitimacy, credibility, and the ability to establish long-term relationships with foreign publics (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005).

One of the most significant developments has been the gradual transition from state-centred diplomacy towards a more inclusive model involving a wide range of non-state actors. Universities, cultural institutions, civil society organisations, cities, artists, academic communities, diasporas, and, more recently, digital content creators have become increasingly important participants in international cultural engagement. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that digitalisation and platformisation have diversified the ecosystem of cultural diplomacy actors, empowering cultural institutions, online communities, and individual opinion makers alongside traditional governmental actors (Grincheva, 2023). Their growing involvement reflects the understanding that international influence is no longer produced exclusively through official diplomatic channels but also through diverse societal interactions and transnational networks (Cull, 2008; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010).

At the same time, digitalisation and technological development have fundamentally transformed both the instruments and the reach of cultural diplomacy. As Grincheva (2022) argues, the digital transformation of cultural diplomacy extends beyond the mere use of online platforms, reflecting a broader shift towards new forms of algorithmic communication, audience engagement, and cultural interaction. These developments correspond to broader transformations in diplomatic practice, where digital technologies increasingly reshape diplomatic communication, institutional adaptation, and international engagement (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Consequently,

digital platforms, social media, virtual cultural exchanges, and online educational initiatives have expanded opportunities for international communication while simultaneously increasing competition within the global information environment. Contemporary cultural diplomacy has become closely interconnected with strategic communication, public engagement, digital diplomacy, and international branding, requiring states to adopt more integrated policy frameworks capable of coordinating diverse actors, instruments, and objectives (Zhu & Wyszomirski, 2023).

These transformations have also broadened the functional scope of cultural diplomacy. Beyond promoting national culture and strengthening international image, cultural diplomacy is increasingly associated with dialogue, trust-building, mutual understanding, conflict prevention, international cooperation, and the promotion of democratic values. In this context, cultural diplomacy increasingly serves as a framework for fostering inclusive narratives, intercultural dialogue, public trust, and more adaptive forms of international engagement in periods of growing geopolitical uncertainty, digital transformation, and hybrid challenges. This expansion of functions does not suggest that cultural diplomacy has abandoned its traditional cultural mission. Rather, it demonstrates how contemporary international and security challenges have redefined the contexts in which cultural diplomacy is expected to operate. Although these emerging functions do not replace its traditional objectives, they considerably broaden both its practical application and its theoretical relevance within contemporary international relations.

Consequently, cultural diplomacy can no longer be understood merely as an instrument of cultural representation. Its contemporary role increasingly lies in its capacity to shape international perceptions, facilitate dialogue across political and cultural divides, strengthen long-term partnerships, and contribute to a more resilient international environment. This evolution illustrates not only the changing practice of diplomacy but also the broader transformation of power and influence in contemporary international relations, where attraction, credibility, communication, and societal engagement have become increasingly significant sources of international influence.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the conceptual analysis indicate that the growing diversity of interpretations surrounding cultural diplomacy should not be understood as evidence of theoretical fragmentation. Rather, it reflects the continuous transformation of international relations, diplomacy, and the nature of power itself. As new actors, communication channels, technologies, and geopolitical realities have emerged, cultural diplomacy has gradually expanded beyond its traditional function of cultural representation, giving rise to broader theoretical interpretations and new practical applications.

This evolution demonstrates that cultural diplomacy has preserved its fundamental cultural dimension while simultaneously adapting to the changing international environment. Its increasing association with public diplomacy, strategic communication, democratic resilience, and international cooperation should therefore be understood as an expansion of its analytical and practical scope rather than as a departure from its original purpose. The absence of a universally accepted definition consequently represents not a conceptual weakness but an indication of the concept's adaptability and continued relevance within contemporary international relations.

The paper therefore argues that conceptual diversity should not be interpreted as an obstacle to the theoretical development of cultural diplomacy. On the contrary, it constitutes one of the concept's defining characteristics, reflecting its capacity to evolve alongside the changing dynamics of international relations.

The findings also suggest that theoretical debates surrounding cultural diplomacy should increasingly focus on explaining the conditions under which different conceptual interpretations emerge rather than attempting to establish a single universally applicable definition. Such an approach would allow future research to better capture the diversity of diplomatic practices observed across different political and institutional contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the evolution of cultural diplomacy illustrates the growing importance of non-material sources of international influence. As legitimacy, credibility, communication, trust, and societal engagement increasingly complement traditional forms of power, cultural diplomacy continues to develop as a multidimensional framework capable of addressing contemporary political, societal, and security challenges. Recognising this adaptive character provides a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding the future development of cultural diplomacy and its growing significance within contemporary international relations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that the evolution of cultural diplomacy reflects the broader transformation of contemporary international relations rather than merely a change in diplomatic terminology or practice. The growing diversity of theoretical interpretations should therefore be understood as a consequence of changing international realities, including globalization, digitalisation, geopolitical competition, and the emergence of new actors and new forms of international engagement.

The paper has shown that cultural diplomacy has evolved from a predominantly state-centred instrument of cultural representation into a multidimensional framework of strategic international engagement. While its traditional objectives remain relevant, contemporary cultural diplomacy increasingly incorporates functions related to dialogue, trust-building, strategic communication, democratic resilience, and international cooperation. This transformation illustrates the growing importance of non-material sources of influence within contemporary foreign policy and confirms the continuing relevance of cultural diplomacy as an analytical and practical concept.

The principal contribution of the paper lies in interpreting the conceptual diversity surrounding cultural diplomacy not as a theoretical weakness but as evidence of its adaptive capacity within a continuously changing international environment. Such an understanding provides a more coherent theoretical framework for explaining the expanding role of cultural diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

Finally, the paper suggests that future research should move beyond debates concerning the search for a single universal definition of cultural diplomacy and instead focus on analysing its evolving functions, actors, and instruments in response to ongoing technological, political, and geopolitical transformations. Recognising this adaptive character enables a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary significance of cultural diplomacy and confirms that its conceptual diversity represents one of its greatest theoretical strengths rather than one of its principal limitations.

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