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The Case for Culture [1]

As Hillary Clinton said last week, "America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America. "We must use what has been called 'smart power,' the full range of tools at our disposal," she said, embracing diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural strategies.

In a poll commissioned by the British Council which we published last week, we found that nearly two-thirds of Americans were worried about the U.S.'s standing abroad, over 8 out of 10 thought it was important for the U.S. to build better relationships with other countries and 79% said that improving the country's reputation and understanding abroad should be a major priority for the new government. Cultural and religious intolerance was voted the main cause of conflict and instability in the world.

So it was great to hear Hillary Clinton acknowledging the valuable role of culture in the new Obama Administration's approach to international relations. Can she and he take it a little further? I think they need to. My first concern is framing. As I have written before , the tool might be the same, but the way it is presented can really limit its effectiveness. The words culture and power – however smart – sit uneasily together.

Why? Let's start by unpacking the word 'culture'. A quick look at dictionary.com indicates three elements, all of which are important for culture as an international relations intervention:

1. that which is excellent in the arts.
2. development of the mind by education or training.
3. the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular group

The notion of power sits uncomfortably with all three elements – at least in the eyes of the recipient. How 'smart' is overpowering my cultural icons and traditions, re-educating my mind, imposing beliefs and sanctioning my behaviours? Even if that is absolutely not the intent, given the current level of trust in the U.S.A in many parts of the world (only 34% approve of U.S. leadership worldwide in a recent Gallup poll) these will be spoken and unspoken fears.

So I would urge some separation between the 'power' and the 'culture'. I have blogged on the three postures of cultural relations – 'helping', 'sharing' and 'boasting'. They sit within the international relations spectrum between the other main elements of 'giving' (aid) and 'shouting' and 'fighting' (messaging, economic and military coercion).

Cultural diplomacy, framed to exert power, risks feeling like cultural imperialism – or aggressive boasting. During the cold war, proxies from the space race to Olympic gold medals were about demonstrating the virility of a system – and touring arts, education and culture exchange were often primarily competitive not cooperative endeavours. A lot has changed, but the new powers of India and China, as well as the older ones in Russia and Europe, want to be recognised as cultural equals. The answer lies in a posture of 'sharing' not simply

boasting or ‘projecting’ culture.

I would also urge that all three of the aspects of culture are integrated. The arts are a vital part of culture, but for much of the world, what Europeans and Americans might call art others see as an integral, not separate, part of the culture. Education and training – and the English language – are a vital part of ‘helping’ in much of the world especially in the Middle East, North Africa, Central and South Asia. This sort of help delivers opportunity and the capacity to function in a globalised world. It is ‘smart aid’ to set alongside ‘smart power’. But the third element – respecting the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular groups – is the most important, and the hardest.

During campaigning, President-elect Obama pledged to "renew American diplomacy to meet the challenges of the 21st century.…rebuild our alliances….meet with all nations, friend and foe, to advance American interests", but also admitted that "resources for cultural diplomacy are at their lowest level in a decade." Cultural relations means listening, being open enough to talk, to change yourself and your own views as much as you expect others to change. It also requires engagement of significant proportions of Americans with significant proportions of aspirational and influential people from all around the world – genuine people-to-people engagement, at scale, is the transformational step in U.S. international relations.

For cultural relations to really work there needs to be a clear distance between the organisations charged with this activity and the government of the day. As I’ve blogged before , with 24/7 news it’s hard for governments – and diplomats – to change views, ‘meet with foes’ and ‘listen to all nations’. The pressure to message and rebut is enormous. Cultural relations works better when it is aligned with the rest of the international relations effort, but has the space to exchange knowledge and ideas, to explore beliefs and the time to build relationships.

At the British Council, we are celebrating our 75th anniversary this year of linking schools, promoting educational opportunities in the UK, forging links between universities, teaching English and training new teachers overseas, hosting art exhibitions from Tehran to Moscow, building networks of young people on issues like climate change and more. We are not unique in what we do. Other countries have similar organisations and we encourage, work with and support them. But today, we can only imagine the difference it would make if we had a sister in the U.S.