

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

A Strategic Context for Cultural Diplomacy ^[1]

Cultural diplomacy encompasses everything from training in modern dance to training in modern politics. At first glance, it seems a relatively non-threatening way to project identity and influence, but its impact can be profound. China's President Hu Jintao recently warned that "international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China," and added that "the international culture of the West is strong while we are weak."

Hu's speech was part of an intensifying Chinese focus on "cultural security," which the government hopes to achieve by restricting cultural imports and expanding China's own production of films and other "soft power" tools.

China's assertiveness points to the significance of culture in diplomacy, which is something the United States has long recognized. In her year-end report for 2011, published in the State Department's online *DipNote*, Ann Stock, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), cited the department's wide range of activities – everything from historical preservation work in Herat, Afghanistan, to an entrepreneurship program for African women.

Without doubt, ECA's contributions to U.S. public diplomacy are exceptionally important. As Stock stated in her report, "When formal relationships between governments are tense, public diplomacy can often forge a way forward." As this implies, America employs cultural diplomacy not because it is a "nice" thing to do, but rather because it serves the strategic interests of the United States.

For that reason, cultural diplomacy efforts should be carefully targeted, and not solely to the countries that are dominating the headlines of the moment. The American relationship with Russia, for instance, is not in good shape. During visits there during the past few years, I was struck by the increase in anti-Americanism among much of the Russian public, and it should be remembered that Russia remains a nuclear superpower. Many young, well-educated Russians, however, are receptive to American cultural outreach, and so cultural diplomacy might remove some of the chill from U.S.-Russia relations.

Cultural diplomacy can also be used as part of an intellectual containment strategy, blocking the influence of troublesome states such as Iran and Venezuela that try to win friends among their neighbors through anti-American ploys. They can be blocked, at least partially, through non-military means.

Like so much else in today's world, culture is increasingly globalized, which means that nations are less able to claim ownership or hegemony in cultural realms. Nevertheless, culture remains at the heart of soft power, and this underscores the need for a carefully thought-through U.S. approach to strategic cultural diplomacy.
