

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Making Sense of Cultural Diplomacy ^[1]

LONDON --- “Cultural diplomacy” has a nice ring to it; it brings to mind folk singing, dances around the Maypole, children’s finger-painting exhibitions, and other such feel-good exports that can make even global adversaries think kindly of each other, at least momentarily.

But cultural diplomacy can be much more than artsy fluff. It is a potent form of public diplomacy that reaches people in ways that overtly political efforts often cannot. Its exercise, however, raises questions about whether artistic integrity can be maintained while being used for the subtle furtherance of national interest.

This was a central issue at a recent conference organized by the Ditchley Foundation in its grand Oxfordshire premises. Some of Britain’s cultural leaders were in attendance, as were scholars and other arts aficionados from France, Greece, Australia, the Netherlands, Japan, Romania, the United States, and elsewhere.

For foreign policy strategists, cultural diplomacy has great value as a trust-builder, providing groundwork on which broader, non-arts initiatives can be constructed. Among the strengths of cultural diplomacy is its credibility, derived from an assumption that artists are relatively pure of heart and above political chicanery. That is debatable, at least in some instances, but governments around the world take advantage of this belief.

This presumption of political innocence is a valuable asset, and some at the Ditchley conference favored trying to preserve it by keeping culture apolitical. They stressed notions of “engagement” rather than diplomacy. The semantic distinction is significant; it means maintaining separation between culture and government, and using culture for outreach that is devoid of political/diplomatic subtext.

This might not be a bad idea in an ideal world. Reality, however, works against such niceties. Consider China, which funds more than 350 Confucius Institutes that teach Chinese language, showcase Chinese culture, and recently added Chinese traditional medicine to their repertoire at some locations. The Chinese government is spending many millions on these centers and certainly is not doing so without recognizing their value in using culture to soften China’s image as an assertive global political player. This is an integral element of China’s soft power strategy.

The Ditchley conference did not find foolproof ways to bridge the divide between cultural purity and diplomatic pragmatism, but it did underscore the value of cultural diplomacy and the need for governments to recognize that much more is involved than “feel-good” exercises. Even while it advances the national interest, culture can transcend politics, as was seen during the Cold War when American jazz musicians traveled to the Soviet Union and were received rapturously by audiences willing to briefly detach themselves from the superpowers’ hostility toward one another.

There is little doubt that such influence continues today in exchange programs and many other versions of cultural diplomacy. Still needing to be better defined, however, is the state's role vis-à-vis the cultural community and the individual artist in the course of these diplomatic ventures. The conversations at Ditchley underscored the importance and complexity of doing this, and made it clear that leaders in both culture and diplomacy must keep talking together if this field is to move forward.
