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From Cardamom Chai to Lattes: A Journey to Understanding Pakistan's PD ^[1]

A long flight to a far-off land—Australia—taught me much about culture, diversity, and the significance of building a strong national brand on an international stage. As someone who teaches culture and “soft power” from historical and theoretical perspectives, this journey provided a practical, hands-on layer to the concepts I often discuss in the classroom.

What started as a professional trip to attend an International Communication Association conference turned into an immersive experience in a country that captured my interest in countless ways. From savoring flat white lattes to connecting with friendly locals in Aussie towns, I found that these people-to-people interactions were not only enriching but truly magical.

The bustling cafes, filled with the hum of conversation and the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, provided a perfect backdrop for reflecting on the potential lessons this journey might offer. Sipping my first flat white, I felt an instant connection to this new place and began to understand the crucial role that culture plays in diplomacy. Every cup of coffee, every friendly exchange between locals and visitors, served as a small yet powerful act of connection—the very essence of soft power.

With these reflections in my mind, I eagerly engaged with international academics and participated in conference sessions on how nations brand themselves in an increasingly diverse society. I was particularly drawn to discussions on global public diplomacy, especially for a country like Pakistan, which often wrestles with the challenges of managing its image on the world stage. As I sipped a piping hot cardamom chai at a vibrant Pakistani restaurant in Brisbane, where the cultural flavors of both worlds blended seamlessly, I pondered what nation branding really means for the people of Pakistan and the diplomats working hard to highlight the country's strengths, despite facing challenges such as political instability, security concerns, and economic struggles, which often overshadow Pakistan's rich culture and heritage.

Modern diplomacy is fundamentally about building connections. It is no longer confined to embassies or high-level negotiations; it thrives in everyday interactions—in the shared experiences of diverse communities, the achievements of expatriates, and cultural exchanges that occur over something as simple as a cup of Chai.

To explore further, I decided to meet members of the Pakistani diaspora. The young professionals I met—especially doctors and engineers—were excelling in their fields while maintaining deep connections to their homeland. Our conversations were rich with stories of their successes, hopes, and efforts to give back to communities in both Australia and Pakistan. Their dual identity was not a contradiction; rather, it was a strength. These individuals were, in essence, Pakistan's informal ambassadors, shaping perceptions of their country through their work, values, and contributions. Through their work in hospitals, universities, and local communities, they were crafting a narrative about Pakistan that extended beyond politics and media portrayals. This was soft power in its most authentic and impactful form—driven by human connection and genuine engagement.

My journey took a deeper turn when I had the privilege of meeting Pakistan's High Commissioner to Australia, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhry, a seasoned diplomat with over thirty years of experience. His eloquence, passion, and commitment to enhancing Pakistan's image in the region were truly impressive. During our discussion on nation branding, he paused thoughtfully and emphasized that public diplomacy goes beyond merely projecting a positive image; it's about making a genuine, tangible impact that strengthens relationships and builds lasting connections.

The High Commissioner highlighted the critical role of engaging the Pakistani diaspora—not simply as a tool of soft power, but as a living bridge between two countries. By empowering the diaspora and their contributions, he argued, Pakistan's influence could be expanded in ways that traditional, formal diplomacy could never achieve alone. He believed that Pakistan's soft power can be derived from its rich cultural heritage, the resilience and talent of its people, and the growing influence of its global diaspora. The High Commissioner's approach to public diplomacy extends beyond traditional statecraft; it involves actively engaging with the diaspora, promoting cultural and educational exchanges, and celebrating the achievements of Pakistani Australians. This strategy not only strengthens ties between Pakistan and Australia but also amplifies Pakistan's influence and soft power in the region.

This conversation reinforced an important lesson for me: modern diplomacy is fundamentally about building connections. It is no longer confined to embassies or high-level negotiations. It thrives in everyday interactions: in the shared experiences of diverse communities, the achievements of expatriates, and cultural exchanges that occur over something as simple as a cup of Chai. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic might, soft power is about attraction and persuasion—winning hearts and minds through culture, values, and positive contributions. For Pakistan, this means leveraging its vibrant arts, cuisine, music, and

sports, as well as the success stories of its people, to build a positive image globally.

Through these experiences and meetings, I learned that Pakistan's soft power in Australia is not just a theoretical concept; it is already at work, shaping perceptions and building bridges. The country's image, though still evolving, is increasingly defined by the achievements and contributions of its people, both within Pakistan and its global diaspora.

I returned home to the U.S. not only with stories to share in my classroom, but with a renewed understanding of diplomacy as a dynamic, living force shaped by individuals and communities. My journey to Australia revealed that diplomacy goes beyond the projection of soft power; it is about forging meaningful connections and making a lasting impact. This experience has profoundly enriched my cultural knowledge, and it will continue to inform and inspire my teaching for years to come.
