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Public Diplomacy in the News: Hello Kitty, Backgammon, & An Outback Car Race ^[1]

“Public Diplomacy in the News” is a CPD Blog series by Andrew Dubbins that spotlights noteworthy stories on public diplomacy topics such as cultural diplomacy, nation branding, exchange programs, international events and conferences, digital diplomacy, and strategic global communications.

How Hello Kitty Turned Cuteness into Japan’s Global Power Play. After the devastation of World War II, Japan rebranded itself not through military might, but through the strategic use of soft power, with Hello Kitty emerging as an unlikely but potent global symbol. Embracing *kawaii* (cute) culture as a form of economic diplomacy and cultural reinvention, Japan transformed its international image from one of imperial aggression to that of a

creative, consumer-friendly nation. Hello Kitty, the iconic character from Sanrio, became central to this shift—generating billions in global revenue and acting as a subtle agent of influence, even serving as Japan’s cultural ambassador.

Isami McCowan / National Geographic

Backgammon and Ballet Build Global Bridges Through Citizen Diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy—grassroots, people-to-people engagement across borders—has flourished between San Diego and Azerbaijan, beginning with a teacher exchange over 15 years ago and blossoming into more than 50 cultural and educational projects. These include international ballet performances, youth chess tournaments, and the founding of the Global Neighborhood Project, which now connects communities in over ten countries. Inspired by Eisenhower’s Sister Cities initiative, this model promotes global understanding through non-political channels such as art, sports, and storytelling. Whether through backgammon in Baku or photography exchanges in Kenya, these quiet acts of diplomacy build bridges that formal politics often cannot.

Martin Kruming / San Diego Tribune

Finnish Ambassador Drives Outback Rally to Champion Cancer Research. Finnish ambassador Arto Haapea is embracing unconventional diplomacy by joining Australia’s rugged Shitbox Rally—a cross-country charity event driving beat-up cars—to raise \$30,000 for cancer research. Inspired by former U.S. ambassador Caroline Kennedy’s participation, Haapea will traverse the outback from Perth to Darwin in a 2005 Toyota Camry with his partner, connecting with Australia’s Finnish community and spotlighting shared values between the two nations. A cancer survivor himself, Haapea views the rally not only as a personal challenge but also as a platform for advocacy, community, and international camaraderie through grassroots engagement.

Ima Caldwell / The Guardian

Modi Blends Tradition and Technology to Expand India’s Global Influence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pursued an ambitious and highly personalized brand of international diplomacy, blending ancient Indian cultural narratives with modern global engagement to elevate India’s global standing, according to an editorial in *The New Indian Express*. Through frequent foreign visits, high-profile summits, and strategic alliances, Modi positions himself as a charismatic global leader, leveraging media, soft power, and diaspora outreach to shape India’s image abroad. His meetings with tech giants such as Bill Gates, cultural figures like German singer-songwriter Cass Mae, and even controversial political actors like Xi Jinping reflect a multifaceted approach to statecraft aimed at enhancing India’s influence across sectors like health, AI, and entertainment. While his efforts have garnered global visibility and support, critics question whether the symbolism and expense of “Modiplomacy” outweigh its tangible outcomes.

Prabhu Chawla / The New Indian Express

Fashion as a Global Language of Power and Peace. A new exhibit hosted at the President Woodrow Wilson House in Washington DC, “Fashioning Power, Fashioning Peace,” highlights how fashion serves as a powerful medium for diplomacy, cultural storytelling, and peacebuilding. Featuring over 50 designers representing embassies from around the world,

the exhibition showcases garments that express identity, resilience, and political messages through textiles both traditional and avant-garde. The event honors the legacy of Ambassador Esther Coopersmith and includes influential contributors like UN representative Runa Ray and young designer Max Alexander. By blending beauty with meaning, the exhibition underscores fashion's unique ability to foster empathy, unity, and cross-cultural dialogue in a polarized world.

The Georgetowner
