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Public Diplomacy in the News: Zelensky's Suit, China's Plush Toys, & FIFA World Cup Tickets ^[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.

Zelensky's suit as diplomatic symbol: Ukrainian designer Viktor Anisimov crafted a black suit with subtle civilian touches that President Volodymyr Zelensky wore to his White House meeting with Donald Trump, marking a deliberate shift from the military garb he has favored

since Russia's invasion. Trump, who had previously scolded Zelensky for dressing too informally, praised the look, setting a warmer tone for talks. Anisimov, who once helped Zelensky transition his image as a comedian, said the design was meant to convey dignity and hope for peace, with the suit also serving as part of a broader capsule wardrobe now used for international occasions from Pope Francis's funeral to the NATO summit.

Anastasiia Malenko / Reuters

Labubus and the rise of China's soft power: China is reshaping its global image through consumer culture, with Pop Mart's wildly popular Labubu plush toys leading the charge alongside video games like *Black Myth Wukong* and *Genshin Impact*. Once seen largely as a source of cheap exports and censorship, China has climbed to second place in Brand Finance's soft power index, fueled by booming consumer brands, international retail expansion, and the global embrace of "c-beauty" and coffee chains. Pop Mart alone has opened over 500 stores worldwide, rivaling Japanese icons like Sanrio, while Goldman Sachs projects its sales could eventually match Lego's. Together, these cultural exports signal a strategic transformation of China's reputation, especially among younger generations, who increasingly see its products as desirable rather than defined by national stereotypes.

Kiana Siriwardene / CNBC

FIFA 2026 World Cup ticket sales begin: FIFA has announced that tickets for the 2026 World Cup, hosted across the United States, Canada, and Mexico with 48 teams and 104 matches, will go on sale starting September 10, 2025. The first phase, called the "Visa Presale Draw," gives Visa cardholders a 10-day window to enter a lottery for ticket purchases, with winners notified by September 30 and assigned dates to buy in October. Afterward, tickets will be released on a first-come, first-served basis, followed by an official FIFA resale phase for returned tickets. All fans must create a FIFA ID and use verified payment methods to participate.

Sofia Delpueche / Secret Los Angeles

Trump summit as a lesson in diplomacy: At a high-stakes White House gathering, European leaders demonstrated how much they had adapted to President Trump's unpredictable style, carefully balancing deference with quiet appeals for security guarantees in Ukraine and a cease-fire. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, once mocked for informality, returned in a sharp suit, humor at the ready, and even a letter for Melania Trump—gestures that won Trump's favor. Around the table, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Finland, NATO's secretary general, and EU Commission's president all tried their hand at shaping Trump's mood while navigating his shifting stance on Ukraine. With Vladimir Putin's influence looming in the background, the meeting revealed the surreal blend of psychology and statecraft required to steer negotiations with a leader as mercurial as Trump.

Shawn McCreesh / New York Times

Cuts to U.S. cultural exchanges spark fears for Fulbright: The Trump administration has moved to eliminate more than 20 State Department exchange programs worth \$100 million, raising alarms that even flagship initiatives like Fulbright could eventually be targeted. The Office of Management and Budget's decision halts grants for programs ranging from TechWomen to the Mandela Washington Fellowship, despite their track records of fostering

global ties. While Fulbright, Gilman, and the International Visitor Leadership Program remain untouched for now, advocates warn that canceling already appropriated funding sets a precedent that could endanger them in the future. The Alliance for International Exchange cautioned that thousands of American students abroad may be stranded if such cuts expand.

Dan Gooding / Newsweek
