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Espresso Diplomacy: The Soft Power of the Public Sphere [1]

Every morning at 9:00am, I stop by at a coffee shop for a cappuccino before teaching my class. Beyond the aroma of freshly ground beans, the sound of the espresso machine, and the barista's energy, I notice students and professors sip their drinks, leaning over laptops and notebooks, wrestling with questions as big as climate change, democracy, or epistemology of artificial intelligence in our lives. As I stand in line, waiting for my turn, I often recall Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere something I learned in graduate school not as an abstract philosophical idea, but as a living space where discourse, identity, and power take place in everyday practices.

As Tufts scholar Alan K. Henrikson notes in his article *What Can Public Diplomacy Achieve?* we should not expect lasting accomplishments from public diplomacy on its own, since it often serves as a support system to larger political, economic, and even military initiatives. Yet it is precisely within these "support functions" that soft power performs its most subtle and enduring work. Coffeehouse conversations and cultural exchanges may not alter the course of history overnight, but they cultivate the conditions where understanding is developed, trust is built, and the narratives that shape diplomacy begin to take root.

These aromatic places become more than a social hub; it is a modern-day stage for the public sphere, where conversations and cultural exchange mediate the boundaries between private life and public engagement. Nations, too, have recognized the subtle power embedded in these spaces. The coffeehouse thus emerges as an unconventional yet strategic venue: facilitating people-to-people engagement, laying the groundwork for cultural diplomacy, and advancing narrative influence one cup at a time. Each hot drink, after all, carries with its stories of identity, culture, and belonging, reshaping discourse in ways both quiet and profound.

While the art of diplomacy is often imagined in the grand halls of embassies, Henry Kissinger's memoirs, or across polished negotiation tables filled with diplomatic strategy, protocol, and firm handshakes, there's another kind of diplomacy that brews in the background, less formal, but quietly powerful and remarkably human. It doesn't involve briefcases, diplomatic cables, or bilateral treaties, but it does involve something far more aromatic, creative and culturally rich: coffeehouses that are quietly telling the stories of nations.

They are platforms of nation's branding and public diplomacy in action in more quiet and profound way. These cozy coffee places have been serving as an age-old institution that host not only lovers of caffeine but lovers of culture, ideas, and intellectual discussions. As scholar Joseph Nye emphasized, "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction." Coffeehouses, as informal yet powerful venues of cultural engagement, serve as effective instruments of symbolic communication, transmitting national values, identities, and narratives in ways that traditional diplomacy often cannot. In these

spaces, culture is not declared; it is experienced. Every cup, every conversation, and every aesthetic choice becomes part of a subtle but persuasive narrative that shapes how nations are perceived globally.

As I have often written, traditional diplomacy is heavy lifting. Diplomats work tirelessly around the clock to host delegations, engage in complex negotiations, and safeguard national interests. The process is highly structured, deeply strategic, and firmly rooted in protocol, conducted largely through government-to-government channels.

But outside those formal corridors of power lies a strikingly human form of diplomacy. I remember walking into an Arabic coffee shop in Washington, D.C., where the atmosphere immediately shifted from official formality to simple warmth. I was greeted with smiles and a polite question: “How do you take your coffee?” In that brief moment, the barista became an informal cultural ambassador not wearing a suit or speaking in diplomatic jargon, but instead offering a steaming cup that carried with it the story of a nation’s values, identity, and way of life.

One particularly compelling example of coffee’s diplomatic power comes from Indonesia. In this article “Coffee Diplomacy in Jokowi’s Era: The Strategy of Cultural and Economic Diplomacy of Indonesia’s Foreign Policy”, researcher Anak Agung Mia Intentilia explores how Indonesian administration strategically positioned coffee as both a cultural symbol and an economic asset in Indonesia’s foreign relations. What makes this approach more striking is the role of non-state actors particularly coffeehouses and local coffee entrepreneurs as key players in executing soft power.

Coffee, in this context, is more than an exportable good; it becomes an ambassador of culture. From baristas performing traditional brewing methods at global expos to Indonesian-style coffeehouses sprouting in cities across Asia, the country projects its heritage through the ritual of coffee consumption. As Intentilia highlights the Indonesian government has successfully intertwined cultural diplomacy and economic diplomacy, using both bilateral and multilateral frameworks to amplify the reach of its coffee culture. It’s a living example of how diplomacy doesn’t just happen in ministries, it also happens over a warm cup, across a small table, in a neighborhood cafe in Amsterdam, Seoul, or Melbourne.

The coffeehouse, whether it’s a street-side stall in California or a quiet cafe in Washington, D.C., tells its own version of cultural diplomacy. Here, people don’t need nameplates or national flags to talk. All they need is a table, a warm drink, and a willingness to connect. That’s soft power at its best: no speeches, just stories.

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In Washington, D.C., and its suburbs, Turkish and Arabic coffee shops serve as vibrant hubs of the public sphere, places where tradition, conversation, and community meet. By contrast, the United States projects its cultural diplomacy through a different symbol: Starbucks. With its iconic green siren, Starbucks has become a globally recognized emblem of American culture, visible in cities and airports across nearly every continent. Yet this raises a question: how does the U.S. model of coffee diplomacy measure against its global counterparts? Nations such as Turkey, Ethiopia, and other Middle Eastern countries showcase their coffee traditions in Washington not merely as beverages, but as living expressions of authenticity, tradition, and cultural continuity. By contrast, the American export emphasizes scale and uniformity. This irony is striking: the United States, which coined and popularized the very concept of soft power, often projects its influence not through the depth of cultural tradition but through the breadth of commercial reach. For instance, when a South Korean student sips an iced Americano at a cafe in Dubai, they are doing more than satisfying a caffeine craving; they want to experience the fast-paced, convenience-driven rhythm often associated with American life.

This highlights how coffee functions as more than a commodity, it rather becomes a cultural signifier and a subtle diplomatic tool. I argue that nations that translate soft power from theory into practice are the ones that truly lead, because the meaningful exchanges occur beyond grand official halls.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the cafes of the DMV area (D.C., Maryland, Virginia), where the hum of local coffeehouses carries the energy of a diverse community. Here, locals, students, diplomats, and tourists sip side by side. The global meets the local in a uniquely *glocal* environment: French pastries served alongside baklavas, Ethiopian blends poured next to Colombian brews, representing the broader human desire for connection across borders.

Historically, coffeehouses have always done this. In 17th-century Britain, they were called "penny universities" because, for the price of a cup, one could engage in spirited discussions on politics, science, and philosophy. The BBC article "How Coffee Forever Changed Britain" noted that these establishments were critical to spreading Enlightenment ideas and developing journalism. They were more than social hangouts; they were intellectual engines.

Fast forward to today, and the legacy of Rosee's coffeehouse as mentioned in BBC article, lives on in different languages, roasts, and rhythms. Every time someone orders a Matcha Latte in Tokyo, or an Americano at a Starbucks in Nairobi, they're participating in what we call cultural diplomacy. Today's coffeehouses inherit that legacy. They may have free Wi-Fi and oat milk now, but the mission remains the same: connect people. From Flat Whites in Sydney to Arabic Qahwa in Doha, coffeehouses serve as modern-day campfires where strangers

become friends, ideas are exchanged, and worldviews expand.

They don’t merely mirror culture, they mold it. A single cup of coffee won’t rewrite a treaty or dissolve decades of tension, but it can spark a conversation that softens boundaries. In that quiet moment between sips and stories perceptions begin to shift. And in the delicate dance of diplomacy, perception isn’t just important; it’s foundational. As any seasoned diplomat knows, hearts are often won long before minds are convinced and sometimes, it starts with something as simple as sharing a table and a warm drink.

So, the next time you walk into a coffeehouse whether it’s in Washington D.C., or a strip mall in San Francisco, pause for a moment as you stand in line. You’re not just in a cafe. You’re in a living, breathing platform of public diplomacy. In a world where headlines divide and politics polarize, perhaps what we need are more public spheres not only to shape opinions, but to cultivate shared solutions for a better world.
