Cultural Diplomacy in the Times of COVID-19

COVID-19 has brought great uncertainty and concern to peoples’ lives, regardless of where they live, level of their wealth, education and job. There is much that is still quite unknown about this virus which has spread faster than the press and mainstream media’s ability to cover it. Social media users have been posting stories on how various aspects of life are being shaped by the virus, whether it is a group dance of nurses in a hospital in Teheran, or inaccurate results of a made-in-China-testing kit in Karachi, or the closed door of a pharmacy in New York during working hours, or a crowd of people in a village waiting for an international organisation’s food aid package in long queues with no concern to social distancing measures. The reliability of such posts is under question, and many governments and international organisations are not happy with them. Such issues make this time a crucial one when governments should seriously consider their cultural diplomacy efforts.

Cultural diplomacy is currently not a priority for governments. However, the reality is that countries, especially policymakers, are going to be judged for their pandemic-related policies and transparency, in the future. This is a time when cultural diplomacy actors need to promote cultural dialogue, mutual understanding and trust in order to circumvent the negative fallout of this virus. This is a time to encourage positive habits for shaping human life, regardless of ethnicity, religion and culture, despite the difficulties posed by this virus.

According to Cummings, cultural diplomacy is a type (or sub-category) of public diplomacy and includes ‘exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’. In the time of COVID-19 instruments, perspectives, challenges, opportunities and actors of cultural diplomacy are diversified. Some countries are facing a leadership crisis to control the pandemic, and yet, are not ready to accept failure. Some countries are using the situation to establish themselves as a worldwide saviour through health diplomacy. Some states are sending small amounts of aid abroad, but making sure to do it in front of cameras and journalists. COVID-19 has become a special time to engage not only state officials and diplomats, but also academics, researchers, doctors, nurses, lobbyists, NGOs, members of civil society and immigrant communities in enhancing the cultural image for their respective countries.

Digitalisation has been around for a while; nonetheless, the pandemic has forced variety of communities (of academics, artists, journalists, activists, diplomats and governors) to adopt new ways of co-working, collaborating, negotiating, exchanging ideas, listening to each other and building mutual understanding.

COVID-19 has, once again, reassured people of the world that they have more in common than they think. People’s health dynamics, feelings and emotions towards the virus, and their concerns about the future, are mostly the same. The paths to control the virus are also likely to converge. National security is now world security. People of the world either all win or all lose. Actors of cultural diplomacy must use genuine dialogue, during this pandemic, to move towards a framework of security and happiness for the world.

Power, in this new time, is not only necessarily about military influence, but also about showing worldwide unification and solidarity. If a country has been enhancing this type of power, then it is successful in attracting, inspiring and leading. Consequently, this country can lead a strong cultural policy or as Joseph Nye argues can form a perfect soft power. The impacts of dialogue, through cultural diplomacy, during this pandemic can assist in reaching the Sustainable
Development Goals (SDGs), especially goal 16: peace, justice and strong institutions. This will also encourage the notion that peace, human rights and goodwill of a nation is just as important as its GDP.

This panel on cultural diplomacy will, hence, concentrate on raising awareness about activities promoting trust, peace and unity during this time of COVID-19, as well as critique its weaknesses. Issues of interest will include:

- Cultural diplomacy, cultural dialogue, peace and trust building
- Health diplomacy as cultural diplomacy in COVID-19
- Art as cultural diplomacy during COVID-19
- Soft power, cultural diplomacy or propaganda? Main or new factors of Global Power Relations during this time of the pandemic
- Conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 as a cultural diplomacy tool
- Digitalisation, new ways for art, education and digital diplomacy

The panel aims to bring together politicians, academics, artists, journalists, think-tanks, diplomats, students and scholars of political science and public/cultural diplomacy.

Reference

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