


Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Cultural Diplomacy and the Construction of Trust ^[1]

Nearly everyone likes cultural diplomacy in principle, but some remain skeptical about its value. It is seen by many as soft power at its softest, safe and fuzzy, with more aesthetic rewards than diplomatic ones.

For those of us committed to using cultural diplomacy as a significant force in advancing the national interest, that kind of condescending view is aggravating and we always welcome solid evidence that it is wrong.

Such evidence comes now from the British Council, long the world's leader in designing and implementing cultural diplomacy programs. A survey  conducted for the British Council by Ipsos MORI and YouGov with more than 10,000 respondents ages 18-34 from ten countries found that “those who have had involvement in cultural relations – arts, education, and English language activities – with the UK have greater trust in people from the UK...and a higher level of interest in doing business and trading with the UK.” Further, trust in the UK government similarly rose.

“Trust” may seem to be an ephemeral quality, but it is at the heart of relations between states and is a principal goal of public diplomacy. The Council's survey found that the connection between cultural interaction and increased trust was particularly significant in Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey, nations with sometimes problematic relationships with the UK. The survey results also indicated that the people of the UK are more trusted than Americans are, often by a significant margin. In addition, the linkage between trust and interest in doing business illustrates the economic payoffs that can be byproducts of cultural diplomacy.

Martin Davidson, chief executive of the British Council, said of the report: “In a nutshell, the people who know us like us – and the people who like us, trust us.” Nothing about this is complicated. Cultural diplomacy can remove mystery and debunk mythology about a country and its people, and by doing so it can allow that country's policies to receive attention without distractions.

Important lessons for the United States can be found in the British Council survey. At a time when Congress is skeptical about public diplomacy, the survey's findings underscore the very substantive value of cultural connections. U.S. cultural diplomacy is robust and merits greater support from policymakers, and the British Council's successes offer ample reasons for providing such support.
