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Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy

Infrastructure for Peace

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht die Bedeutung interkulturellen Dialogs und kultureller Diplomatie für die Friedensförderung in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und geopolitisch umkämpften Weltordnung. Ausgehend von Ansätzen der Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, der Konflikttransformation sowie der Forschung zu kultureller Diplomatie und Soft Power wird argumentiert, dass geopolitische Spannungen nicht allein durch materielle Interessen, sondern auch durch Identitäten, historische Narrative, Wahrnehmungen und Feindbilder geprägt werden. Interkultureller Dialog kann solche antagonistischen Konstruktionen durch gegenseitige Anerkennung, Perspektivwechsel, Vertrauensbildung und kontinuierliche Kommunikation über politische und kulturelle Grenzen hinweg hinterfragen. Kulturelle Diplomatie kann dabei als institutioneller Raum für solche Begegnungen dienen. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass beide Ansätze strukturelle Konflikte nicht allein lösen können, jedoch als Infrastrukturen des Friedens dazu beitragen, die kulturellen und relationalen Bedingungen von Konflikt und Verständigung nachhaltig zu verändern.

Schlagwörter: Friedensforschung, Interkultureller Dialog, Kulturdiplomatie

Abstract

This article examines the role of cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy in promoting peace in an increasingly fragmented and geopolitically contested world order. Drawing on Peace Research, conflict transformation theory, and scholarship on cultural diplomacy and soft power, it argues that geopolitical tensions are shaped not only by material interests but also by identities, historical narratives, perceptions, and enemy images. Cross-cultural dialogue can challenge these antagonistic constructions by fostering mutual recognition, perspective-taking, trust, and sustained communication across political and cultural divides. Cultural diplomacy, when understood not merely as strategic influence but as reciprocal engagement, can provide institutional spaces for such encounters. The article argues that these practices cannot resolve structural conflicts alone, but can function as infrastructures of peace by transforming the relational and cultural conditions under which conflict is reproduced and managed.

Keywords: Peace Research, Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Cultural Diplomacy

Peace in a Fragmented World Order

The contemporary international system is characterised by increasing geopolitical fragmentation, intensifying great-power competition and the erosion of shared frameworks of international cooperation. While conventional approaches to international security tend to focus on military capabilities, economic interests and institutional arrangements, Critical Peace Research highlights the importance of human relationships and perceptions beyond the security dilemma and zero-sum assumptions, human centered peace and security approaches in international relations and the deconstruction of dichotomies (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch, 2024; Mühlbauer/Moegling, 2026). In this context, cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy acquire particular significance. The central question is therefore: How can cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy overcome geopolitical tensions in a fragmented world order? This contribution argues that they cannot eliminate structural conflicts or substitute for political negotiations. They can, however, contribute to peace by transforming the relational, cultural and epistemic conditions through which geopolitical antagonisms are produced and reproduced.

The importance of Culture in Peacebuilding

A fundamental starting point is the recognition that culture is not external to conflict. Rather, political conflicts are interpreted through historically situated systems of meaning, collective identities and narratives. Bräuchler's (2018) account of the “cultural turn” in Peace Research demonstrates why culturally specific understand ings of conflict, security, justice and peace need to be incorporated into peacebuil ing theory and practice. Similarly, Bräuchler (2020) argues that peacebuilding needs to engage more seriously with anthropology and ethnography because co cepts such as reconciliation and peace acquire different meanings in different s cial and cultural contexts. Culture should therefore neither be treated as an imm table source of conflict nor reduced to a superficial instrument of intercultural co munication. It is a constitutive dimension of how actors understand both the selves and their political environment. This perspective connects directly to John Paul Lederach's (1996) conception of conflict transformation. Rather than understanding peace merely as the termination of direct violence, conflict transformation seeks to alter the relationships, structures and social patterns that sustain antagonism. From this perspective, dialogue is important because it creates relational spaces in which adversaries can encounter one another beyond established enemy images. Lederach's later work further emphsises the significance of relationships, imagination and social networks in constructing sustainable peace (Lederach, 2005). Cross-cultural dialogue can consequently be

understood as a form of relational peacebuilding: it does not require actors to abandon their identities or political interests but creates possibilities for recognizing difference without converting difference into antagonism. This is particularly important because geopolitical competition frequently produces simplified binary narratives. The division of the world into “East” and “West”, “democracies” and “autocracies”, or “the Global North” and “the Global South” can obscure internal diversity and encourage the construction of homogeneous images of political and cultural others. Huntington's (1996) The Clash of Civilizations r mains one of the most influential formulations of the argument that cultural and civilizational identities could become major sources of international conflict. Yet an alternative reading is possible: cultural difference is not inherently conflictual. Its political consequences depend substantially on whether difference is institutionalized through exclusion and securitization or through dialogue, recognition and cooperation.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy – Soft Power Tools of Great Powers or Peacebuilding Infrastructure?

The concept of intercultural or cross-cultural dialogue is particularly relevant here – as we see in the coming articles in this book. UNESCO's conceptual framework defines it as a reciprocal and sustained process through which people from different cultural backgrounds engage with similarities and differences, develop mutual understanding and critically reassess their own assumptions (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO 2022). Such dialogue is therefore more demanding than cultural exchange alone: it requires listening, reflexivity and a willingness to recognise the legitimacy of perspectives different from one's own. Research commissioned by UNESCO (2019) similarly identifies intercultural dialogue as a potential mechanism for preventing conflict, strengthening social cohesion and creating conditions for sustainable peace.

Cultural diplomacy provides an institutional framework through which such dialogue can take place across borders. Traditionally, cultural diplomacy has been understood as the use of cultural resources and exchanges in the pursuit of foreign-policy objectives (Cummings, 2009). Its conceptual development is closely connected to the literature on public diplomacy and soft power. Nye (2004) argues that states can influence others not only through coercion or material incentives but also through attraction, values and culture. Melissen (2005) subsequently emphasised the transformation of public diplomacy towards more networked and dialogue-oriented forms of international engagement. Rather than communicating exclusively to foreign publics, contemporary diplomacy increasingly involves

communicating with them. For Peace Research, however, cultural diplomacy should not be reduced to an instrument of strategic influence. If culture is employed merely to improve a state's international image or to generate political legitimacy, cultural diplomacy risks becoming indistinguishable from sophisticated propaganda. Its peacebuilding potential emerges instead when it facilitates reciprocal interaction and creates relatively autonomous spaces for communication. As Schneider (2005) demonstrates in the context of public diplomacy, cultural activities can establish forms of international engagement that are difficult to achieve through conventional diplomatic channels. The emphasis should therefore be placed on mutuality rather than persuasion. This distinction is especially significant in periods of geopolitical crisis. When formal diplomatic relations deteriorate, cultural and societal networks can sometimes preserve channels of communication. Universities, museums, cultural organisations, artists, journalists, students and civil-society organisations can function as intermediary actors connecting societies even when relations between governments become confrontational. Nye (2008) consequently stresses the importance of networks and credibility in contemporary soft power, while Melissen (2005) identifies the growing significance of non-state actors and dialogue in modern diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy can thus operate as a form of preventive diplomacy below the level of formal interstate negotiations. Its effectiveness nevertheless depends on several conditions. First, dialogue must be sustained rather than reduced to symbolic encounters. Second, it must be based on a degree of reciprocity; one-sided cultural projection is unlikely to produce genuine mutual understanding. Third, cultural diplomacy must acknowledge asymmetries of power. Not all cultures possess equal international visibility, institutional resources or representational authority. A genuinely peace-oriented approach therefore requires attention to postcolonial critiques of international cultural relations and to the voices of actors historically marginalised within dominant diplomatic structures (Ang/Isar/Mar, 2015). The role of cultural diplomacy is consequently best understood not as resolving geopolitical conflicts directly but as transforming the social conditions under which such conflicts are interpreted and managed. It can reduce stereotyping, facilitate perspective-taking, develop interpersonal trust and preserve relationships across political divides. UNESCO similarly emphasises the contribution of culture to conflict prevention, reconciliation, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, while stressing the importance of protecting cultural diversity and cultural rights (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

Conclusion: Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy as Infrastructures for Peace

Cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy cannot overcome geopolitical tensions and wars by themselves. But they can, however, contribute to overcoming the antagonistic logics through which geopolitical tensions become culturally and socially entrenched. Their principal contribution is relational and epistemic: they create opportunities for recognition, mutual learning and the transformation of enemy images. In a fragmented international order, this makes cultural diplomacy more than an accessory to conventional foreign policy. Properly conceived, it constitutes an infrastructure of peace—one that keeps communication, relationships and possibilities for cooperation alive when geopolitical structures are increasingly characterised by division.

For Peace Research, this implies that peacebuilding should move beyond a narrow focus on formal institutions and conflict settlements and pay greater attention to the cultural and relational environments in which peace becomes possible. Sustainable peace requires not the elimination of difference, but the capacity to manage difference without transforming it into violence. Cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy can contribute precisely to this capacity: they do not promise a world without disagreement, but they can help construct a world in which disagreement does not inevitably become confrontation.

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