

Citizen Diplomacy: An Alternative Track to Peace and Security

Charles Harrison

Kansas City Kansas Community College

Kansas City, Kansas

The increasing interdependence among the various nations around the world has made the preservation of peace and security an absolute necessity. States often engage in formal diplomatic conferences to resolve complicated issues concerning their national interests, but sometimes the use of official diplomacy is not possible or even desired. When official diplomatic efforts fail, countries often rely upon unofficial diplomatic efforts to solve their problems. One unofficial method of diplomacy is called citizen diplomacy and Cate Malek, a writer for the Conflict Research Consortium, defines citizen diplomacy as “the unofficial contact between people of different nations, as opposed to official contacts between governmental representatives” (1). Citizen diplomacy is an effective instrument in forging relationships between states because it emphasizes the creation of personal relationships between the conflicting parties. Citizen diplomacy is conducted by a diverse group of actors including individuals and non-governmental organizations. Citizen diplomacy is an effective tool in resolving regional and global conflicts especially in areas concerning economic, ideological, ethnic, territorial, religious, or governmental disputes. Many developing societies,

including South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, could further benefit from non-traditional diplomacy, because of the high costs associated with traditional diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy is an effective supplement to official diplomacy and its use should be increased in regions where conventional diplomacy is not always effective.

Citizen diplomats are a diverse set of actors with a variety of backgrounds, skill sets, and goals. Non-governmental organizations are the most important actors associated with citizen diplomacy, and according to Michele M. Betsill, a professor of Political Science at Colorado State University, “an NGO is an organization that is not formed by an intergovernmental agreement, has expertise or interests relevant to the international institution, and expresses views that are independent of any national government” (4). NGOs are frequently involved at the forefront of controversial issues and they are routinely successful because they employ individuals who are experts in a particular field of study. NGOs also have a diverse set of roles, and this can include the facilitation of direct conversations between foreign governments and rival factions, thus resolving cultural issues between rival ethnic groups. NGOs are unique in that they can establish private relationships with governments of different countries without formally representing their native country. The absence of an official allegiance to a specific country is the most important characteristic of an NGO because it allows the NGO to focus less on international politics, and more on the desires of the conflicting parties. NGOs are frequently successful in negotiating peace agreements. A successful instance of an NGO-brokered peace agreement came in 2005 when the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue successfully negotiated a settlement between the Indonesian government and separatist rebels (Dowell 1). The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, an

NGO, was successful because its only goal was to craft an acceptable settlement between the two parties and it did not have to tailor its solution to meet the desires of a particular government. NGOs are very effective in resolving regional and international disputes involving a wide range of issues.

According to the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy, citizen diplomacy plays a critical role at the individual level of unofficial diplomacy because it helps to create personal relationships that ultimately dismantle cultural stereotypes (1). The cooperation between individual citizen diplomats and foreign nationals is the first step in fostering collaboration between entire nations. Individual citizen diplomats include anyone interested in creating personal relationships with foreign nationals and promoting international cooperation according to the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy (1). The effect of individual citizen diplomats is different than the effect of NGOs. Individual citizen diplomats experience personal interaction with foreign nationals, and the relationships forged by individual citizen diplomats allows the United States to be portrayed in a positive manner. An increase in the United States' reputation is going to be extremely important in the future because positive opinions concerning the United States will lead to greater economic, strategic, and ideological cooperation with countries around the world. The use of citizen diplomacy on an individual level can be best illustrated by the efforts of Dr. Robert Fuller, a pioneer of citizen diplomacy, during the Cold War. A short biographical summary of Dr. Fuller's work by the Huffington Post reveals that Dr. Fuller, a professor of Physics, frequently visited the Soviet Union during the 1970s to promote bilateral communication between the Soviet Union and the United States (1). The efforts of Robert Fuller clearly demonstrate that individual

citizen diplomats can improve the global reputation of their native country and they can have a positive impact on the relationship between conflicting states. The 21st century is going to be defined by the increasing interdependence among nations, so it is important that the United States creates, maintains, and strengthens its ties with foreign countries.

The Middle East has always been a region of economic and strategic significance. Due to the national interests of the United States, it has become vital that the United States establishes and maintains friendly relationships with Middle Eastern governments. The importance of the Middle East cannot be understated. The region's importance is based on the United States' alliance with Israel, trade through the Suez Canal, and the region's vast oil reserves. According to Dr. Dalia Dassa Kaye, who is an expert on Middle Eastern security at the RAND Corporation, the Middle East "includes politically unstable and vulnerable regimes, making cooperation and conciliatory actions more difficult" (10). Citizen diplomacy is the best way to create long-lasting relationships between the various governments and factions of the Middle East because the region is often rife with polemic issues such as the statuses of both Israel and Palestine. The use of unofficial diplomacy in the Middle East has already yielded many positive outcomes. One such outcome came after The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, an NGO, hosted several seminars that according to Dr. Kaye "focus on the creation of a regional security regime" (16). Although the creation of a regional security regime has not completely materialized, the projects are still very important because they foster an idea of mutual cooperation in the region. This cooperation is going to be vital due to the recent uprisings in the Middle East. The uprisings are

undoubtedly a change in the political and power structure of the region. The use of unofficial diplomacy in the Middle East is going to become vital in stabilizing this region. Many Middle Eastern governments, factions, and people have become disillusioned with the United States. Creating a harmonious relationship with Middle Eastern governments needs to be established through personal relationships that portray the United States of America as an altruistic and caring nation. Unofficial diplomatic efforts must be made in order to ensure regional stability in the Middle East.

Regional and global stability will become increasingly important as the world continues to become interconnected through mediums such as the internet, trade, politics, and conflict. Citizen diplomacy should be employed much more often during the 21st Century so as to avoid costly and deadly conflicts. The use of this unofficial type of diplomacy will significantly aid the creation of cultural, economic, and strategic synergy. Currently, the international standing of the United States is waning due to its aggressive foreign policy that includes the controversial War on Terror. The efforts of impartial NGOs and individuals will significantly enhance the reputation of the United States. Although the NGOs will not officially represent the United States, they can still positively affect the United States because these organizations construct settlements that are tailored to the interests of conflicting parties while minimizing political ramifications. Citizen diplomacy can be applied to any region especially areas that are experiencing perennial conflicts such as Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. These regions are typically perceived as locations that perpetually experience war, poverty, chaos, and violence. Citizen diplomacy will be an effective method of bringing cooperation and understanding to these volatile regions because personal relationships

convey a far greater empathy than that of the official relationships formed across a negotiating table. Citizen diplomacy is an effective and alternative track for achieving peace and security.

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