

Cultural Diplomacy in ASEAN: Collaborative Efforts

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Abstract—The new 21st century has altered the political constellation amongst actor of international relations. Yet, one thing is certain that today's world cannot be separated from diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy offers an alternative solution to address the complexity of international relations by employing culture as the foundation of soft power. Unlike the conventional diplomacy which depends on formal and official state actors, the modern concept of diplomacy allows room for participation from non-state actors. This paper tries to apply the modern concept of cultural diplomacy to a regional organization. It argued that cultural diplomacy will be a suitable tool for ASEAN in invigorating the passion towards a regional integration. Further descriptive analysis on the type of cultural diplomacy that takes place in ASEAN will be given using the three schools of thought by focusing on the role of state and non-state actors.

Index Terms—ASEAN, culture, diplomacy, soft power.

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical milestone of diplomacy study dates back to the Westphalian system in which the formalization of diplomatic conduct took place in the aftermath of the nations gathering in Osnabruck and Munster. Back then, diplomacy was inherent to state sovereignty and was conducted exclusively by states officials. However, the changing of world politics causes diplomacy to no longer strictly belong to the realm of state officials as it can be employed by various non-state actors.

The discourse on the correlation between culture and diplomacy has existed since the early of civilization. However, the study of International Relations has put less attention on the existence of culture, comparing to the political and economic perspectives. Originally cultural diplomacy refers to the potential of cultural expression through exchanges of ideas and information amongst people in order to increase their mutual understanding [1]. It reached its golden age during the Cold war era, and come to demise along with the United States victory. However cultural diplomacy has re-gained its importance during the wake of contemporary world politics and since then became a suitable instrument of maneuvers in the ever-changing relationships of modern states. *“Far from being on the verge of a new order the world has entered a period of great disorder. In facing these new dangers, a re-examination of old priorities is needed. Cultural diplomacy, in the widest sense, has increased in importance, whereas traditional diplomacy and military power ... are of limited use in coping with most of these dangers”* [2].

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Cultural diplomacy is not limited to relations between states but expanded involving the public masses. This paper tries to analyze the cultural diplomacy activities that have been carried out by ASEAN. ASEAN is chosen based on its goal to establish an ASEAN Community. Being different than the aim of conventional diplomacy that creates public perception between states, ASEAN cultural diplomacy offers a new approach in creating a perception amongst people of regional member states to a regional identity. In this light ASEAN brings a new attention to the relatively new if not unexplored realm of cultural diplomacy related to a regional building.

II. APPLIED CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The use of culture diplomacy between power-holders prior to Westphalian system can be traced back as early as the Bronze age. *‘It is argued that cultural diplomacy has been a norm for human's intent upon civilization’* [3]. Diplomacy during that time became a prominent way to nurture, maintain and preserve civilization in contrast to the waging war characteristic that places civilization on the verge of destruction. This simplistic mechanism emphasizing on relations between culture has been altered with the introduction of the nation states in which cultural diplomacy was conducted amongst sovereigns, although mainly informal prior to the WW I [4]. Later on, the post-Westphalian system of diplomacy was directed largely amongst nation-states giving birth to French's Universalism of ‘The Sun King’ and United States’ ‘City of the Hill’.

Thereupon, states across the region have adopted cultural approaches into their foreign policies. VOKS, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries became the tool for Soviet government to sponsor relations with pro-Soviet cultural groups. In western European such movements were pioneered by the French through the establishment of Alliance France in 1883, stressing the importance of language to connect France and the rest of the world. Italy founded the Dante Alighieri Society in 1889 to promote Italian culture. Meanwhile Germany created the Goethe Institute and the UK government decided to use British Council as its extended arms. Similar trend also spread into Asia. China took the road to cultural diplomacy in order to easing the strained diplomatic tension; especially apparent in its relation with Japan. Japan too employed cultural diplomacy as part of its national policy through Japan Foundation and International House of Japan as a way to engage its ASEAN counterparts.

III. DEFINING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Defining what constitutes cultural diplomacy is proven to be difficult. This term is often used ‘interchangeably’ with propaganda, public diplomacy and cultural exchange [5].