

Smart Q&A
No. 2012-13

Public Diplomacy in a Changing World

August 1, 2012

Interviewee

Jan Melissen

Public diplomacy has been attracting a lot of interest in recent years, yet little is understood about how this concept works and the ways in which countries utilize it to strengthen their interests. To help explain more about public diplomacy and why countries are paying close attention to it, the EAI invited Professor Jan Melissen, Netherlands Institute of International Relations. Professor Melissen outlined the ways in which public diplomacy has had an impact upon diplomacy as well as how it can enhance South Korea's international role. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from this interview.

Q1: How has public diplomacy evolved in the past decade, and do you see any particular developments in recent years, which have been characterized by the economic crisis and the rise of East Asia?

A1: "Public diplomacy has developed since 9/11 in the sense first of all that there are so many more states taking a keen interest. It is a real global phenomenon now with, I should say, a particular passion, a particular enthusiasm for the subject and what public diplomacy may achieve in East Asia."

- Since 9/11, many countries in the world have developed a keen interest in public diplomacy, particularly in East Asia. Despite this widespread interest, there is still no theory behind public diplomacy, nor is there any commonly agreed definition as to what it is. However, public diplomacy does reflect a more general transformation of diplomacy as a whole. With international affairs becoming more transnational, diplomacy is becoming more network-based. In this way it involves more actors with less focus on states.
- The global economic crisis since 2008 has resulted in countries using public diplomacy in a more proactive way. Countries have started to consider the ways in which public diplomacy can offset the economic difficulties that they are suffering from. This means that countries are looking at the instrumental use of public diplomacy, not only as a way to promote their image and reputation but also as a way to better serve broader foreign policy objectives, such as economic interests.
- The role of social media is now being used as a representative platform for the diplomatic establishment, opening up new ways for dialogue. Social media enables diplomats to reach much further than the embassy itself can, which was traditionally only concerned with the host government.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
158 Eulji-ro Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2012

www.eai.or.kr

Q2. Many countries in East Asia have shown strong interest in public diplomacy, yet rely upon hard power when it comes to the main issues in the region. As the balance of power logic continues to dominate East Asia, how does public diplomacy fit into this picture?

A2: "Suddenly, public diplomacy has complicated the traditional great power games. It has given a voice to middle powers, like South Korea, which have something to offer to their region and to the global community as a whole"

- In recent years, China and the United States have both invested significantly in public diplomacy. However, China faces three challenges in this regard. Firstly, Beijing has to accept that it cannot control foreign public opinion as it would like to. An example of this was shown when international public opinion focused on the Tibetan issue during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Secondly, authoritarian countries face a challenge when fully embracing public diplomacy as it requires devolution of power and the participation of civil society. Finally, it is still not clear what China's "story" is. China's development model, while attractive, is not applicable to smaller countries with limited resources. Furthermore, it lacks other crucial elements such as democratization.
- Public diplomacy has offered smaller powers in East Asia a way to play a more influential role on the international scene. Unlike great powers, their use of public diplomacy focuses on building transparent regional networks. Such efforts unsettle the great powers, as it could stand in the way of their regional ambitions. Public diplomacy can also help smaller powers in Asia to set the agenda on issues that are of a priority to them, instead of those pushed by China or the United States. The Bali Democracy Forum is a good example of such agenda-setting. Indonesia, through this forum, is able to place issues on the regional agenda that are important to it and other middle powers.
- Public diplomacy in East Asia has a number of unique characteristics. Firstly, instead of a single focus on promoting the positive image of one's country through public diplomacy, countries in East Asia are more focused on informal relationships between countries. Secondly, in building such relationships, East Asian countries are using a network approach due to different backgrounds and political systems of countries in the region. Networks have an advantage as they tend to be more inclusive, unlike clubs which are more exclusive. Lastly, East Asian countries, including South Korea, tend to share ideas to strengthen public diplomacy.

Q3: Global Korea has been a popular concept in South Korea as the government seeks to develop its international role. How can public diplomacy help to enhance South Korea's international role?

A3: "Korea is realizing that it is being taken seriously and this is the moment to come in with ideas of its own for that wider world which is a global market of ideas and that's also where Korea could successfully come in if it wants to be seen by the rest of the world as [a country] with good ideas about global issues."

- In order for South Korea to strengthen its public diplomacy on a global level, a few efforts should be considered. Firstly, Seoul should use knowledge diplomacy to project creative ideas to address global issues, such as environment, non-proliferation, and development cooperation. Secondly, South Korea should look at how it can boost its soft power by taking into account the long-term attraction of its cultural appeal. Finally, Seoul must be prudent when taking on the role of a broker. If it takes on a very proactive approach then South Korea will likely push other countries away.

- To strengthen public diplomacy in South Korea, further efforts are required in domestic politics. As civil society plays the main role in public diplomacy, the government needs to facilitate more communication and sharing of ideas with the people.

About the Interviewee

Jan Melissen

Prof. Jan Melissen is Director of Research at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael” and Professor of Diplomacy at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). He is founding co-editor of peer-reviewed *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* and editor of the *Diplomatic Studies Series* published by Martinus Nijhoff. He has a wide-ranging research interest in contemporary diplomacy. Among his seven books are *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (Macmillan, 1999) and *The New Public Diplomacy* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005 and 2007), which was translated in three other languages. Further co-edited titles include *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and *Consular Affairs and Diplomacy: Evolution and Transformation* (Martinus Nijhoff, 2011).