

# Still Exchanging? The History, Relevance, and Effect of International Exchange Programs

Written by Giles Scott-Smith

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GILES SCOTT-SMITH, SEP 14 2012

In an age when social media networks, digital platforms and 'cloud formations' are being explored as new terrain for branding campaigns and public diplomacy strategies, it might seem odd that 'slow media' such as exchange programs can still garner much attention. Yet public statements declaring their continuing worth are common. On 30 May 2012 former Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered a speech to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) in which he proclaimed that "no policy has proven more successful in making friends for the United States" than encouraging foreign students to study at US universities. US influence and credibility – not to mention its economic competitiveness – depended on continuing "to build bridges with universities that are in cultures different from our own." While the Pentagon may not at first be thought of as an advocate of soft power tools like exchanges, US strategic influence around the globe has undoubtedly been enhanced through the many military training programs operated with allied nations – as Gates well knows.[1]

Gates' speech highlighted the many different roles that exchanges can play in US foreign affairs: breaking down stereotypes and obstacles of cultural difference; contributing to the transfer of knowledge and expertise; familiarising the outside world with the variety of opinions in the United States, as well as familiarising Americans to the different views held outside the US. His outlook has been avidly shared by Secretary of State Clinton, who has turned her appointment into a globe-trotting public diplomacy exercise (843,458 miles travelled as of 10 August) that emphasises at every opportunity the value of facilitating people-to-people contacts. Clinton has pursued on a grand scale President Obama's personal reflection in his Cairo speech of 4 June 2009, where he talked of the need to "expand exchange programs, and increase scholarships, like the one that brought my father to America." [2] This is promoting the United States as the unique 'Crossroads Nation', as David Brooks would say.[3]

The United States is usually perceived as being a latecomer to public diplomacy, with the government taking an official role in exchanges only from the creation of the Division of Cultural Relations in 1938 (compared to the formation of the British Council in 1934 or Alliance Française in 1883). But this is a mistaken interpretation. It is true that France preceded everybody in the modern age through their *mission civilisatrice* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Foreign Ministry deliberately seeking to spread French language and cultural knowledge as a form of influence and power. Yet by 1920 the United States had already initiated three specific exchange programs: the 1908 Boxer Indemnity fund, a kind of re-education project to enable Chinese to study at American universities; the tours for journalists promoting US war aims run by George Creels' propaganda-esque Committee for Public Information in 1917-1918; and Herbert Hoover's humanitarian post-WWI Belgian-American Educational Foundation that enabled a two-way bilateral exchange of scholars. By 1930, facilitated by the private offices of the Institute for International Education, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Council on Education, and backed by philanthropic largesse, the United States was already a prime destination for international students. The re-education programs in post-war Germany and Japan stand out as the most concentrated efforts to use exchanges to promote democratic values abroad by using the US as an example, although Iraq after 2003 was in some ways a similar testing ground. The Fulbright Program (approximately 310,000 participants since 1946) and various State Department programs following WWII (such as the Foreign Leader / International Visitor Leadership Program, with more than 150,000 participants since 1949) have maintained exchanges as a significant if relatively ignored part of US foreign affairs. And these are only the official programs. In the 2010-2011 academic year around 723,000

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international students studied at US colleges and universities – around 20% of the global total – contributing an estimated \$20bn to the US economy in the process.[4] While many other nations have been pursuing exchanges for years – India, for example, has been running its Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme for nations in the Global South since 1964 – it is the United States that, in terms of scale and purpose, have developed their use the furthest.

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Why is there such a belief that these activities remain relevant in the digital 21<sup>st</sup> century? Several perspectives are relevant here. Firstly there is the National Security position. State interests can be served by exerting influence and alter behaviour, summed up by Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as "the ability to shape the preferences of others." [5] The heyday of behavioral social science in the 1950s and 1960s produced a mountain of research on how this could be applied. While there is some truth to this, it should not be taken as justifying exchanges as simply an added instrument of statecraft. Yes, they can be a useful means to expand networks of influence and make ideas travel, but no, they should not be reduced to some kind of counter-terrorism tool. All public diplomacy activity quickly loses its credibility if it is too obviously selling a point of view and telegraphing ahead that it is aiming for a specific result. What is more, this drives a narrow evaluation culture that regards those who do not buy into the desired value system as 'a waste of money' as best and suspect at worst. Restricting visas on the grounds of security is not an ideal starting point for promoting openness through exchanges. The experience of US public diplomacy under the George W. Bush administration, with its incessant desire for message control and positive branding, shows the negative impact that a strong national security impulse can have.[6]

Secondly, there is the Values approach. Spreading values is, as Jeremi Suri once claimed, simply what a civilised power should do. G. John Ikenberry has emphasised that the ability to socialize others to appreciate the benefits of your norms, values and institutions is a key aspect of benevolent hegemony.[7] Research has shown that exchanges can function as "transnational channels" for spreading democratic ideals, even among military officers.[8] In contrast to other public diplomacy activities, exchanges foster relationship-building over the longer term [9] and are an ideal means to pursue informal norm promotion. While this approach fits liberal internationalism perfectly, it does not hold a monopoly. China's network of Confucius Institutes, begun in 2004, now boasts over 320 locations in around 100 nations worldwide, and this is entirely designed to familiarise the rest of the world with the belief systems and cultures of China. To an extent, exchanges have been taken up in the ongoing fascination with branding in public diplomacy, something that occupies nations large and small. Faced with a negative international image in the early 2000s due to a sudden outbreak of political violence and problems with multicultural integration, the Netherlands sought to improve its image abroad by running a visitors programme for 'high potentials' and 'influentials' from the BRICS and the Middle East. Although this attempt at 'concentrated soft power' has been regarded as a success, using exchanges in order to promote a certain national brand identity can backfire if the participants lack the freedom to check for themselves the reality behind the image.

The costs are low, relatively speaking. Taking the US as an example, compared to a Pentagon budget of about \$646bn in 2012, the State Department has to do with a core budget of \$47bn. Of that, \$1.1bn is reserved for public diplomacy, and *of that*, \$630m is for government-sponsored exchanges. So if they can generate some goodwill and business contracts, nurture the (self-)image of the United States as a beneficent nation, and offer only low risk (Sayyed Qutb accepted), then there would seem little reason to complain. The role of the private sector here is crucial, not least for being able to establish cross-border contacts outside of diplomatic channels. A recent surprising example has been the Pyongyang Project running exchanges between North Korea, North America, and the UK. [10] The attempt to build contacts with Iran in 2005-2008 proved more difficult, the political environment proving too hostile and suspicious, although the effort as a whole did show that there was plenty of potential for building bridges should relations be stabilized in the future.[11]

Thirdly, there is Problem-Solving. This approaches the issue from the perspective of mutual gain, in contrast to the strict guidelines of National Security and the broad brush of Values. It is one thing to devise ways to promote ideals and values abroad, and quite another to see exchanges exactly as the word suggests – as an exchange. This means stepping out of the sender-receiver dynamic of much public diplomacy, and looking to promote link-ups that can

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conceivably mature into transnational, public policy-relevant epistemic communities (for instance in health care, disease control, water use, sustainable agriculture, scientific education). It can also be applied as a social approach to conflict resolution, as demonstrated by the activities of French *Bureau International de Liaison et de Documentation (BILD)* and its German counterpart *Gesellschaft für übernationalen Zusammenarbeit (GÜZ)* in successfully promoting Franco-German rapprochement after WW II.[12] The importance of this approach is that it looks at the added value of exchanges not simple as a way of protecting the nation or spreading the right values, but as a means to achieve what it essentially is all about – linking people for mutual gain. Thomas Risse's examination of the formation of specific 'transnational policy coalitions' fits this approach well.[13] Of course exchanges, however much equal opportunity may be applied, will always be predominantly an elite exercise. Nevertheless, the focus should be on the two-way / multi-channel exchange of expertise in mutual interest, with no chauvinistic claim to the answers. This necessarily involves understanding and appreciating the cultural impulses and norms of others, and giving them an equal voice in the process. Exchanges in this way become an open-ended means, not a specific end.

## It's the Network

The effect of exchanges on the conduct of international relations is obviously impossible to quantify. Advocates of 'mutual understanding' and cross-cultural dialogue stress their contribution to a more peaceful world, but there are so many other variables involved to make this a difficult claim. Changing opinion is one thing, altering behaviour is quite another. The alumni list of the US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program is impressive,[14] and there are enough surveys and anecdotes to support the view that those who participate in the various American exchange programs regard it as a positive experience. But instead of asking what these networks actually result in (in other words, as a form of measurable power), it is better to recognise, following scholars such as Manuel Castells and John Arquilla, that the networks created are *themselves* a form of power. Exchanges contribute, in a loose, unguided way, towards an ever-denser global network society. [15] Needless to say, states don't have a monopoly on this activity either.[16] In an era of increasing international tensions over issues such as territory, natural resources and wealth distribution, even a small contribution towards greater cross-border understanding is welcome.

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**Giles Scott-Smith** is a Senior Researcher with the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, the Netherlands. He also holds the Ernst van der Beugel Chair in the Diplomatic History of Transatlantic Relations since WW II at Leiden University.

[1] For an up-beat assessment of this, see Robert D. Kaplan, 'Supremacy by Stealth,' *The Atlantic* (July/August 2003), available at <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200307/kaplan>>

[2] Obama speech available at the *New York Times* site:  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=7&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=7&_r=1)>.

[3] David Brooks, 'The Crossroads nation,' *New York Times*, 8 November 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/opinion/09brooks.html>

[4] 'More Foreign Students studying in USA,' *USA Today*, 14 November 2011, available at <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/story/2011-11-13/foreign-students-boost-usa-economy/51188560/1>>

[5] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, p. 5

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[6] See Giles Scott-Smith & Martijn Mos, 'Democracy Promotion and the New Public Diplomacy,' in Inderjeet Parmar, Linda Miller & Mark Ledwidge (eds.), *New Directions in US Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 225-240.

[7] See 'Socialization and Hegemonic Power' in G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 51-87.

[8] Carol Atkinson, 'Does Soft Power Matter? A Comparative Analysis of Student Exchange Programs 1980-2006,' *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (2010), pp. 1-22.

[9] See M. Leonard, C. Snewing, and C. Stead, *Public Diplomacy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002).

[10] See <[http://www.pyongyangproject.org/about\\_us.html](http://www.pyongyangproject.org/about_us.html)>

[11] See Giles Scott-Smith, 'The Heineken Factor? Using Exchanges to extend the reach of US Soft Power,' *American Diplomacy*, June 2011, available at <[http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2011/0104/comm/scottsmith\\_heineken.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2011/0104/comm/scottsmith_heineken.html)>

[12] See Ulrich Krotz, *The Ties that Bind? The Parapublic Underpinnings of Franco-German Relations as Construction of International Value*, Minda De Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, October 2002. Available at <<http://www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/docs/pdfs/Krotz4.pdf>>

[13] Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1995). For a discussion on this see Giles Scott-Smith, 'Mapping the Undefinable: Some Thoughts on the Relevance of Exchange Programs within International Relations Theory,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008), pp. 173-195.

[14] See <<http://exchanges.state.gov/ivlp/alumni.html>>

[15] See for instance Ali Fisher, 'Mapping the Great Beyond: Identifying Meaningful Networks in Public Diplomacy,' CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, available via <[http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/research/CPD\\_Perspectives](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/research/CPD_Perspectives)>

[16] See Giles Scott-Smith, "Cultural Exchange and the Corporate Sector: Moving Beyond Statist Public Diplomacy?" *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 40 (2011), pp. 301-313.

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## About the author:

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**Giles Scott-Smith** holds the Ernst van der Beugel Chair in the Diplomatic History of Transatlantic Relations since WWII at Leiden University, and is a senior researcher with the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands. He is the current chair of the Transatlantic Studies Association, and is involved in the New Diplomatic History network. Originally starting out in International Relations, he gradually moved into Cold War history, and has always looked for a productive mix of IR theory and historical analysis. His research interests cover the role and influence of non-state actors in international affairs, be they think tanks, social movements, academic institutions, or private citizens. Recent publications include *Western Anti-Communism and the Interdoc Network: Cold War Internationale* (Palgrave, 2012), and *Transnational Anti-Communism: Agents, Activities, Networks* (Palgrave, 2014). His wider work can be viewed at [academia.edu](http://academia.edu).