

Geoffrey Wiseman

Isolate or Engage: Adversarial States, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Public Diplomacy.

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Isolate or Engage, edited by Geoffrey Wiseman explores how the United States (US) conducts public diplomacy in adversarial states. An adversarial state is defined as a country "with which the United States maintains limited or no formal diplomatic relations because of mutual hostility...for extended periods" (p. 11). The book covers nine contemporary case studies: Soviet Union/ Russia, China, North Korea, Vietnam, Libya, Iran, Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela. The work, which is primarily composed of case studies, delves into how the US attempts to influence foreign publics when its diplomatic relations are limited, whether limiting diplomatic ties hamper US interests, and challenges and opportunities in public diplomacy when diplomatic relations are limited. The volume as a whole is skeptical of the isolationist foreign policy of the US, which jeopardises the country's potential for public diplomacy "in a hyperconnected world...driven by popular trends and movements rather than by what governments do" (p. 4).

Most authors in this work employ a nontraditional understanding of diplomacy that includes non-state actors as well as governments as the public diplomacy actors. This book focuses on three kinds of US efforts in public diplomacy in adversarial countries. The first two of which warrant the question of whether they should even be regarded as public diplomacy: traditional government-to-government diplomacy in public using broadcasting, social media, or messengers as intermediaries (President Carter's visits to North Korea, Chapter 3), which have been termed by Bruce Gregory (2014: 1) "diplomacy's public dimension" rather than public diplomacy. The second is concerned with pure people-to-people exchanges that may not necessarily have intentional political agendas and hence should be treated at best as unintentional contributions to US public diplomacy efforts. Third, the focus turns to government-sponsored public diplomacy initiatives, which are the least common examples found in the book.

In the case studies, non-state efforts are emphasised more than state-centric public diplomacy initiatives, particularly due to deep-rooted suspicions of the American government as well as the obvious difficulties of conducting official public diplomacy while diplomatic relations are limited. Indeed, almost every interaction that is not an official government-to-government diplomatic communication is treated as public diplomacy in those chapters that are written by area experts who are not necessarily students of public diplomacy. The reason for this vague conceptual choice seems to be the understanding of traditional diplomacy as private (confidential) diplomacy, while public diplomacy is regarded as being almost everything else (see p. 292). The chapters on China (Chapter 2), Vietnam (Chapter 4) and Cuba (Chapter 8) in particular suggest that public diplomacy should be left to civil society, in line with Manuel Castells' (2008: 91) idea that public diplomacy "is not government diplomacy," but it "is the diplomacy of the public."

Wiseman concludes that US has always been working to influence the publics of isolated countries. However, this has proven very difficult, as isolation restricts the use of the US's official channels of public diplomacy. Often, individuals and non-state actors are more successful in facilitating exchanges with peoples in isolated countries. Pure people-to-people exchanges in such cases are free from governmental direction and most often lack a political agenda or intention. Therefore, they are not public diplomacy per se, but they may help "form the basis for future normalization of relations and improved ties" (p. 282). Furthermore, diasporas, individuals, and non-state actors are often helpful in catalysing relations and even mediating, but their interactions and messages cannot be fully controlled by the governments (pp. 283, 293). Wiseman recommends increasing the support of the US government for people-to-people exchanges (p. 292), but if these "pure" exchanges based on an understanding of genuine dialogue and mutuality, are also considered to be proxies of US government, publics in adversarial states may become as suspicious of civilian initiatives as they are of official US initiatives.

The work in general takes a skeptical view of isolating foreign policies and makes the case that limited channels of official communication damage the US's interests vis-à-vis isolated countries, not least by making it impossible to realise the full potential of public diplomacy in them. The

authors emphasise that it is important to intend to change the behaviour of adversarial states over the long run rather than employing isolating strategies that aim change regimes in adversarial states in the short run. However, another conclusion drawn in the book (particularly chapters on USSR/ Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran) reminds us that what the US can achieve in adversarial states through public diplomacy is limited, particularly when the nature of the problems is a matter of high politics, such as a nuclear standoff.

Isolate or Engage makes three significant contributions to the study of public diplomacy. First, while many studies have failed to address the foreign policy aspect of public diplomacy, this book makes the connection, suggesting that public diplomacy must be integrated into the foreign policy of the US (p. 7). The underlying assumption is that when public diplomacy is detached from foreign policy, it “loses its commonsense meaning and becomes something else” (p. 298). Second, case studies dealing with the US’s public diplomacy with adversarial states ask, as the title of the book suggests, whether to “isolate or engage” with those states. Wiseman’s book reminds us that this fundamental question has been neglected for years in the field of public diplomacy. Third, the case studies contained in this work demonstrate the importance of the connections and activities of individuals and non-state actors, particularly in adversarial states, challenging long-established state-centric international relations theories and bringing people-to-people exchanges closer to the mainstream.

However, the book could certainly have been improved, on at least two fronts. First, most chapters do not go beyond episodic examples of public diplomacy, failing to study each country in a more systematic and analytical way. Second, although Wiseman rightly points out that the boundaries are blurry between public diplomacy and other transnational interactions (pp. 13, 292, 298), the book falls short of addressing “thorny conceptual questions such as who is a public diplomacy actor and what are public diplomacy’s boundaries” (p. 7). The almost interchangeable use of the terms *soft power* and *public diplomacy* in the case studies contributes to the work’s overall conceptual unclarity. Nevertheless, *Isolate or Engage* provides readers with significant insight into whether and how public diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges can contribute to improving ties between adversarial states.

References

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Dr. Kadir Ayhan¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, ayhan@hufs.ac.kr