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"Weaponisation of Culture": Implications for Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs in the 21st Century

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Traditionally, culture in diplomacy has been viewed as a positive force. It fosters cooperation between nations, as cultural exchange is widely seen as a catalyst for deeper mutual understanding across societies. Governments frequently employ cultural diplomacy initiatives, ranging from language training and the performing arts to music and cultural exchanges, to build closer ties, encourage people-to-people contact, and stimulate tourism and economic activities. Overall, it has long been regarded as a constructive tool of foreign policy.

However, recent geo-political frictions and escalating international disputes have made diplomacy and foreign affairs much more complex. Culture, despite its positive and unifying force in international relations, has increasingly been pulled into these geo-political conflicts. Rather than serving as a bridge between nations, culture is now deployed as a diplomatic "weapon" directed against adversaries. This "weaponisation" is driven by both governments and ordinary citizens,

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intentionally or not. This dynamic fundamentally undermines the foundational purpose of cultural diplomacy, which is to foster positive cooperation.

Even though we have international agencies like UNESCO that assists countries in registering cultural traits through frameworks such as the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the process is sometimes used by countries to claim their cultural heritage against other nations. Because UNESCO relies entirely on member state nominations rather than independent discovery or grass-root nominations, it can instead become an arena for political manoeuvring. Consequently, it is this underlying battle for ownership that is becoming increasingly problematic, turning shared traditions into competitive diplomatic battlegrounds.

Hence, culture has thus become “weaponised” in contemporary international politics. While the broader term is frequently invoked in the West and the Middle East in connection with the expansion of religious doctrines and ideological conflicts, the dynamic in the East often manifests differently. Here, culture is frequently “weaponised” by states to stake claims over national heritage and contest historical narratives. Crucially, these disputes are no longer confined to intergovernmental friction; they increasingly involve ordinary citizens, particularly across social media platforms where beliefs and doctrines are amplified with unprecedented speed through the digital world.

These developments carry profound implications for diplomacy and international relations in the 21st century. Diplomats and the wider foreign affairs community must be acutely aware that major conflicts that can originate from minor cultural complaints and everyday cultural exchanges must be managed with greater care to prevent rapid escalation. A crucial distinction must be drawn between state-driven ownership and shared civilisational roots. As Benedict Anderson argued in

his famous book “Imagined Communities”, the legacy of post-colonial nation-state building has fostered institutional friction, leading modern states to dispute what was originally shared heritage. Ultimately, this dynamic forces a reflection on why do nations feel compelled to contest cultural identity when such boundaries are, at their core, social constructs.

What is more critical in the contemporary era is for nations to pivot away from hegemony and unilateralism and choose to instead to unite and collaborate. The mindset of “weaponising” culture against states is fundamentally detrimental to the core spirit of regionalism. In the context of ASEAN, such competitive nationalism directly undermines the long-term aspiration of building a cohesive and people-centred ASEAN Community. Rather than allowing heritage to be carved up into exclusive state properties, regional diplomacy must actively reclaim culture as an instrument of convergence. ASEAN diplomatic discourse provides a vital framework to transcend rigid national boundaries, encouraging member states to view shared traditions not as battlegrounds for ownership, but as bridges for mutual understanding and collective resilience.

Navigating contemporary geopolitical complexities presents challenges for international relations, yet diplomats must remain aware of how cultural heritage can be increasingly “weaponised.” So to say, culture as a soft power can be used as a hard power against other nations. As state and non-state actors leverage shared traditions for competitive nationalism, the foundational spirit of cooperation is undermined. In regions like Southeast Asia, this trajectory directly threatens the long-term vision of building a cohesive ASEAN Community.

To counteract this fragmentation, diplomats and policymakers should recognise the detrimental affect of minor cultural disputes that can lead to broader regional conflicts. Rather than permitting shared heritage to be carved up into exclusive state properties, international actors must actively reclaim culture as an instrument of convergence. By fostering constructive dialogue and

transcending rigid national boundaries through collaborative regional frameworks, the international community can safeguard shared civilisational roots and preserve the unifying purpose of cultural diplomacy.

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