

Podcast transcript

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# Cultural relations, dialogue and co- operation in an age of competition

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# Transcript

The following transcript is for the podcast accompanying the research report Cultural Relations, Dialogue and Co-operation in an Age of Competition produced by the British Council. The report and podcast are available on the British Council website [here](#).

## OPENING MUSIC INTRO

### ALISON BAILY:

Hello, and welcome to this podcast from the British Council, exploring the role of cultural relations in an age of great power competition. I'm Alison Baily, Senior Policy Analyst in our research and policy insight team in London.

In March 2021, the UK Government published its integrated review into security, defense, development and foreign policy. The review found that compared to 10 years ago, the international order today is more fragmented and characterized by increasing competition between States over interests, norms, and values. While this trend is expected to continue the review also recognizes the increased urgency of global cooperation, both to tackle transnational challenges, such as climate change and global health, and to navigate the impact of rapid technological changes, on our societies, economies, and relationships.

Cultural relations as practiced by the British Council emphasizes building mutual trust and understanding between people from different countries as the basis for securing positive, mutually beneficial long-term and sustainable transnational relationships. It does this by promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation across a wide range of disciplines, including the arts, education, language, science, and more. In the decade to come a key question for government will be how best to manage international relations in a way which minimizes tensions and keeps open channels of dialogue, and cooperation.

To help answer this question, the British Council commissioned new research to understand how the practice of cultural relations can help governments navigate the 21st century Context of Competition, as well as what benefit it brings to countries that practice it effectively.

At the end of the podcast, I'll be speaking to members of the research team to hear what they found. But first we'll hear from experts from the worlds of diplomacy and cultural relations about their perspectives on why cultural relations matters today.

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## MUSICAL CUE

ALISON BAILY:

So, let's hear from the British Council's own Joanna Burke.

Joanna, could you begin by introducing yourself and then explain why you believe cultural relations matters today and what benefits it brings to countries like the UK?

JOANNE BURKE:

My name is Joanna Burke. I'm the British Council's Regional Director for wider Europe. The 21st century is characterized undoubtedly by increasing competition, but it's also characterized, by an increasing need for cooperation on the biggest issues which are facing us and the shifting Panorama between the relationships between country at political level needs some sustained long-term underpinning, and that's what cultural relation provides.

I think it's absolutely essential under tense conditions, if you want to continue to relationship with that culture and that country. And that's because cultural relations is there for the long term. It's for the good times and the bad times. It enables the relationships to be picked up in a different way when the good times come back again. So cultural engagement in relations that enables doors be kept open, where they might otherwise be completely closed and starting from scratch is always much more difficult, than actually being able to have a platform which has continued and that you're able to pick up on.

ALISON BAILY:

Thank you, Joanna. So as we heard there cultural relations is there for the long term serving to keep the relationship going, especially when things become challenging, but what do Diplomats think? To answer that question we spoke to two senior members of the UK diplomatic service. First here's the UK's Ambassador to Turkey, Sir Dominick Chilcott.

Sir Dominick, what is your view of the importance of cultural relations today?

SIR DOMINICK CHILCOTT:

Hello, my name is Dominick Chilcott, I'm the British ambassador to Turkey. I think cultural relations are an important part of, bilateral relations between countries. A sort of 19th century view of bilateral relations would be they're essentially things conducted by governments and maybe governments and large businesses that were involved in trade between countries. But actually as time has gone by increasingly towards the end of the last century and in our century, which is much more interconnected because of the internet and digital technology, relations between countries are as much about the informal relations between societies as they are between governments. And I think in that respect cultural relations have a great role to play

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because if cultural relations are able to promote respect for different cultures and different ways of organizing society and respect and understanding and some empathy for, then I think it's much more likely that good relations, cooperative relations between countries will enjoy public support. And I think these days without public support, relations can, in certain circumstances, deteriorate because there's no underlying underpinning for, for a strong relationship with country X and the society, if there's, if a public sport doesn't exist and that has an effect on parliamentary opinion in the UK, and indeed therefore the amount of political energy that gets invested in the relationship.

ALISON BAILY:

Next here's Tom Oppenheim speaking from Moscow, Russia. Tom, could you introduce yourself and say why you think cultural relations matters?

TOM OPPENHEIM:

Hi, my name is Tom Oppenheim. I am the Counselor in charge of Press, Public Diplomacy and Programs at the British Embassy in Moscow. Cultural relations matter, I think because fundamentally cultural relations are about connections between people, people doing things that they care about, people that are doing things that they're passionate about. And from those sorts of connections across borders comes an appreciation of and an understanding of cultures, countries, languages, which are not our own. I think there's often a temptation to think of cultural relations as somehow a key to unlock something else, as a way of creating space for dialogue in other areas and cultural relationships can do that undoubtedly, but they're valuable for their own sake as well. People who have an international mindset think differently, their art speaks differently and, as a consequence, the sorts of people who are influenced by the products they produce are more likely to have a more open and more connected view of the world and less likely to demonize, or even just to see the worst in people from, from another country.

ALISON BAILY:

Both of these answers, I think highlight the role of cultural relations in helping navigate the difficulties created by today's more fragmented geopolitical landscape, but what about the positive benefits that cultural relations provide for countries who practice them effectively? Here's what Tom Oppenheim had to say.

TOM OPPENHEIM:

The benefits are around how our country is perceived. I think of this in a long term rather than a short-term perspective. I think that if there is a habit of seeing, hearing, experiencing, British culture and the arts, then over the long-term, that will have an impact on how people think about our country more broadly. And that can only be a positive thing. Our country is made of individuals and it's made of institutions and individuals and institutions benefit hugely from

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having a positive reputation because it means people want to work with them. And if people want to work with you, it creates opportunity for you to do new things, to expand your horizons, to reach new audiences and to kind of explore the depth of your particular discipline, whether that's, you know, sculpture or experimental jazz, that doesn't really matter. You'll find people in big countries that have depth to their culture. You'll find counterparts that you wouldn't have found at home, and we've seen that time and again here.

ALISON BAILY:

Thank you, Tom. Sir Dominick, is there anything you'd like to add on what in your experience makes cultural relations effective?

SIR DOMINICK CHILCOTT:

I think cultural relationships or cultural relations is another way of looking at soft power relations. And I think the key to soft power is not to be seen to be promoting it in a way. I mean, soft power is about the international reputation that the institutions and our society in the UK enjoy. And I think we slightly undermine the soft power effect of having such strong institutions like the BBC and our university sector, if we are too obvious in promoting it. So I think that the way the Council promotes cultural relations is actually rather nuanced. For example, the university sector it is saying we have some great universities and invites the investors over to come and talk to prospective students, but the way they do it, it doesn't feel like somebody from the Government saying, you know, these are the best universities in the world to go to and they push them to take notice of what I'm saying.

I think the slightly arm's length relationship with the government that the Council enjoys works very much to its benefit in cultural relations. I think if they were too closely associated with people like me, the Ambassador, there would be, it would be maybe more difficult to be persuaded about the, the high standing in which these institutions in the UK are held because people will say, well, of course he would say that wouldn't he. So, you know, I'd rather admire the way that the Council has evolved in its promotion of cultural relations. So it is making sure it's targeting the right things, but it's doing it in an especially kind of arm lengths away from Government that I think it has more credibility.

ALISON BAILY:

Thank you. Sir Dominick and thank you, Tom.

MUSICAL CUE

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ALISON BAILY:

So we've heard there, that it's important to think, not just about what the role of cultural relations is for helping countries navigate the 21st century, but the ways in which it can be delivered most effectively. In January 2021, the British Council commissioned a new study to investigate both of these questions. Our final speaker was a member of the research team working on that project. Caitlin, would you like to introduce yourself and explain to our listeners the objectives and design of the research?

CAITLIN BYRNE:

My name is Caitlin Byrne. I'm a Professor of International Relations based here in Australia and part of the research team working on this project. And essentially the research was really commissioned by the British Council, focusing on the core question. And it's a question facing governments globally about how they can best manage relationships in a way that minimizes tensions, but allows for the opportunity for ongoing dialogue and builds towards cooperation.

We were asked to look more closely in particular at the role of international cultural relations in addressing this question, how does it contribute to dialogue and cooperation, particularly in contexts where the bilateral relationship might be quite challenging? So, in fact, we then advanced the study looking at 12 cases, focusing in on the work that's delivered by different cultural institutes, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, Institut Francais, and the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. And we looked at their operations in a range of countries, countries where that reflected a diversity of conditions, where there were challenges in the relationship for a number of reasons.

ALISON BAILY:

Thank you, Caitlin. What did you learn from the research?

CAITLIN BYRNE:

I think firstly, what we learned was there's no single formula to the way that cultural relations, actually takes place. No two contexts are the same, relationships are different. There are multiple and sometimes quite complicated challenges that arise in these various relationships. But we were able to discern five interrelated factors that really drove success, the success of a cultural Institute and pointed to that success, and the essence of cultural relations.

So if I go through those five, the first relates to the competency of the personnel within a cultural Institute, the kind of relational competency that they bring, the technical know-how, their ability to operate in a complex and different context. And of course, interpersonal skills, all of these really factor in a kind of authenticity and engagement that enables respect and allows for a

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mutually beneficial relationship to develop at that personal and subsequently at an institutional level.

Secondly, organizational reputation is quite critical and we saw this with cultural institutes being able to deliver and develop their reputation primarily because of their understanding of the benefits that came from that engagement, the two way benefits. And secondly, because of their commitment to the intrinsic value of cooperative action. And this is really interesting because it's quite distinct or removed from the idea of strategic gain.

Thirdly, we were able to look at the very important relationships that cultural institutes are able to develop, not just with partners in the country, within which they're operating, but also with partners at home. And, you know, we really saw cultural institutes play a bridging role between the two countries that forms the basis for existing and future partnerships, and that's extremely important as relationships develop.

Fourthly, the nature of programs, the way that programs can be developed in a multi-stakeholder way, but also in a way that is responsive to the interests and needs of partners at home and within the operating country over time.

And lastly, the ability of cultural institutes to contribute to an enabling environment that underpins the relationship, this is very much a long-term impact and a long-term driver of relationships. It comes from sustained engagement, engagement that over time develops and evolves to reflect, sometimes the changing dynamics of relationship, but also can build and thicken the kinds of connections and the opportunities for dialogue that exists between nations and can even potentially, look back to a strong relationship over time, but also cast forward with intergenerational kinds of aspirations.

Those five factors working together, and again, there's no single formula to the way they work, but those five factors really offer some levers for developing and engaging in dialogue and cooperation over time.

## MUSICAL CUE

ALISON BAILY:

And from your experience doing the research Caitlin, why do you think cultural relations matters today?

CAITLIN BYRNE:

Cultural relations has really never been a more compelling prospect to be honest, I think in today's world. And certainly from the research that we conducted, the instances of contest of greater fragmentation of increasing challenge in the way that we navigate international relations

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means that we need more touch points. We need to understand better, the very different operating environments that exist in different countries, and we need to find new and different sometimes creative forms of dialogue or channels of dialogue. Without those, we are at greater risk of falling into the trap of miscommunication or even miscalculation in the way that we develop and deliver foreign policy. And, you know, in this kind of environment where there is a strategic reordering underway, the risk of miscalculation or miscommunication is far greater than it's ever been before so cultural relations actually allows us some opportunity to avoid that.

ALISON BAILY:

Thank you, Caitlin, and thank you to all our contributors. We hope you've enjoyed this podcast from the British Council's Research and Policy Insight team. You can find the report, Cultural Relations, Dialogue, and Cooperation in an Age of Competition on the British Council website, by searching for the research and policy insight section. As well as the report, you can find a whole range of articles and research, which explore the latest thinking on culture, education, language, and the UK's international engagements, and you can subscribe to our insight newsletter.

Thank you for joining us and goodbye.

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