OBSERVARE
Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa

e-ISSN: 1647-7251
Vol. 15, N.º 2
November 2024-April 2025

JANUS.NET
e-journal of International Relations

ASIA-EUROPE ENGAGEMENTS IN SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND EDUCATION EXCHANGE: THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE IN DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

As an interpretative lens for understanding Asia-Europe knowledge exchange in higher education, science and innovation, this paper contests the 'knowledge diplomacy' framework. First, knowledge diplomacy is a 'floating signifier' that homogenises the distinct differences between science diplomacy, education diplomacy and innovation diplomacy. Second, the term depoliticizes diplomacy in its attempt subtract politics from knowledge relations in world affairs. Third, the KD framework is overly normative as it portrays positive and benign outcomes of exchange to the neglect of the conflict, competition, and confrontations that exist within and between Higher Education Institutions and scientific communities.

Keywords

Asia-Europe Meeting, Higher Education, Science Diplomacy, Statecraft, Think Tank, Track-Two Diplomacy.

Resumo

Como lente interpretativa para compreender o intercâmbio de conhecimentos entre a Ásia e a Europa no domínio do ensino superior, da ciência e da inovação, este artigo contesta o quadro da "diplomacia do conhecimento". Em primeiro lugar, a diplomacia do conhecimento é um "significante flutuante" que homogeneíza as diferenças distintas entre a diplomacia científica, a diplomacia educativa e a diplomacia da inovação. Em segundo lugar, o termo despolitiza a diplomacia na sua tentativa de subtrair a política das relações de conhecimento nos assuntos mundiais. Em terceiro lugar, o quadro de KD é excessivamente normativo, uma vez que retrata resultados positivos e benignos do intercâmbio, negligenciando o conflito, a competição e os confrontos que existem dentro e entre as Instituições de Ensino Superior e as comunidades científicas.

Palavras-chave

Encontro Ásia-Europa, Ensino Superior, diplomacia científica, política de Estado, think tank, diplomacia "track-two".

How to cite this article
Stone, Diane (2024). Asia-Europe Engagements in Science, Innovation and Education Exchange: The Limits of Knowledge in Diplomacy. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 15 N.º 2, November 2024-April 2025, pp. 185-201. https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.15.2.7.

Article received on 29 April 2024 and accepted for publication on 19 September 2024.

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL 15 N.º 2

November 2024-April 2025, pp. 185-201
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1. Introduction

The notion of 'knowledge diplomacy' is the latest addition to millennial reinterpretations of inter-state relations: ideas of 'cultural', 'diaspora', 'education', 'museum', 'sport' and 'university' diplomacy, amongst other variants. Accordingly, it is worth asking what is 'new' about it, who benefits from the use of the term 'knowledge diplomacy' and what purposes this term serves. The first argument of this paper is that 'knowledge diplomacy' is a homogenizing term that neutralizes significant differences of style and substance in its 'umbrella-like' inclusion of all things knowledge related. It is a 'floating signifier'. The second argument is that the term depoliticizes diplomatic conduct in the realm of international 'knowledge' exchange. Finally, the term is overly normative, presumptive of positive and peaceful outcomes (Woo, 2023: 692) overlooking the way knowledge diplomacy – no matter how benign the intentions and motivations of its proponents – can be instrumentalised and put to work in aid of state interests.

Diplomacy, as a concept in the scholarly field as well as practice of governance, has been undergoing considerable shifts this century. Public service has been internationalised. Some civil servants are increasingly being asked to interact with their counterparts overseas and this activity is no longer monopolised by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). Quasi diplomatic activity is also undertaken by some large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs. eg. Médecins Sans Frontières), think tanks and scholars (in security dialogues like the Munich Security Conference), international foundations (like the Gates Foundation) or diaspora communities as well as via certain private individuals, for example, 'good will ambassadors' for the UN, or networks of scientists. These actors cannot be classified as 'diplomats' in the traditional sense of the word. Nor do they act with the same power or authority. They have been called 'new diplomats' (Kelley, 2010). But both analytically and in policy terms, there is a trend of hybridity in how 'old' and 'new' forms of diplomacy coexist and reinforce one another (Leira, 2018).

One such evolution has been the recent rise of the so-called 'knowledge diplomacy' Knight, 2021). However, there are other cognate terms: 'university diplomacy' or 'education diplomacy' as well as 'science diplomacy'. For decades, there has been a rich

and diverse ecology of educational exchange, research collaborations and scientific partnerships between Asia and Europe. This paper re-examines some of these linkages through the lens of the so-called 'new diplomacy' (Kelley, 2010; Leira, 2018; Higgott & Terkovich, 2021). The new diplomacy emphasises the often-innovative role of non-state actors in diplomacy but does not forget or diminish power dynamics. This school of thinking is more firmly grounded in disciplines like International Relations (IR) and International Law, as well as Peace, Security or Global Studies. The recent idea of 'knowledge diplomacy' – or KD – is derived from Higher Education studies.

This paper is based on a review of the concept of KD which first emerged in its current format from 2018. Diplomacy conducted through science, technology and innovation, or via education exchange is extensive. Accordingly, the focus is narrowed a little through a focus on some *illustrative* relations in Asia-Europe contexts – an approach which cannot be comprehensive due to word constraints. The paper is structured as follows: First it discusses the idea of 'knowledge diplomacy' and older cognate terms like 'new diplomacy' and 'science diplomacy'. Second, it addresses some current Asia Europe initiatives in this field. Third, some limitations of the knowledge diplomacy (KD) framework when cast against concepts like science and/or Higher Education Institution (HEI) diplomacy are outlined. Examples of Asia-Europe 'knowledge engagements' criss-cross these sections.

2. Knowledge Diplomacy

In the past 30 years, with the advent of the telecommunications revolution and ease of transportation, the realm of diplomacy has opened to so-called 'new diplomats'. They are individuals, organizations and networks based outside traditional diplomatic institutions such as MFAs or international agencies. Ever since the joint report of the Royal Society and the American Academy for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) on science diplomacy (Royal Society, 2010), variations on the theme that these two institutions advocated have emerged with studies and investigations into think tank diplomacy (Bayenova, 2023), education diplomacy (Piros & Koops, 2020), academic, university or higher education informal diplomacy (Perez-Garcia & Nierga, 2021) alongside more general studies and perspectives that highlight the role of 'knowledge actors' in either public diplomacy or cultural diplomacy.

'Knowledge diplomacy' has been defined as: "the role that international higher education, research, and innovation play in building and strengthening international relations and, vice versa, the role that international relations play in facilitating and improving IHERI" (Knight, 2020: 38) in a two-way process. The core characteristics of the knowledge diplomacy approach are stated as "collaboration, reciprocity, and mutuality" and are premised on the notion that HEIs can strengthen relations between countries.

This paper argues that 'knowledge diplomacy' is an expansive and somewhat state-centric frame for understanding world affairs that veils earlier analytical work on different varieties of diplomacy informed by knowledge actors. The KD framework envelopes what had earlier been identified as science diplomacy and education diplomacy as distinct and separate processes. Science diplomacy – such as elaborated by the Royal Society (2010) in the UK and AAAS – was focused on scientific endeavour and research. These two

scholarly associations (amongst others) considered science diplomacy to be distinct from educational exchange involved in international teaching and training programs. These were seen as more akin to 'public diplomacy' or 'cultural diplomacy'. Likewise, the KD framework subsumes 'innovation diplomacy' which has also been treated in earlier literature (eg. Leijten, 2017) as involving different actors and interests from business or corporate research and development facilities.

Consequently, a very diverse range of organizational actors are herded under the more recent label of 'knowledge diplomacy' (eg. Hernandez, 2021: 91). Universities and colleges, scientific laboratories, professional associations, as well as consultancy firms, think tanks, the analytic units inside government (at city, local and national levels), the research departments of NGOs and trade unions are all potential knowledge diplomats. Similarly, certain international organizations – like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) – could also be identified as platforms for, or engaged in, knowledge (for climate or innovation) diplomacy (Hernadez, 2021).

Likewise, there is a galaxy of different types of experts and knowledgeable individuals are subsumed under the 'knowledge diplomacy' umbrella. These can range from youthful groups of students, alumna, faculty on exchange programs through to Nobel prize winners. Finally, in terms of policy focus, knowledge diplomacy can intersect global issues that range from climate change, food security, migration, epidemics, refugees and migration, poverty reduction, and water security. The concept just about covers everything.

The KD term lacks analytical purchase. It can mean all things to all interests. Too many different types of individual and organizational actors are lumped in together. The phrase becomes a 'floating signifier' – that is, a concept or symbol that is sufficiently loose and malleable to mean many things to many people, yet specific enough to galvanize action in a particular policy context. A signifier absorbs rather than emits meaning.

The content specific knowledge and professional expertise/experience connected to specific policy sectors is lost under the KD umbrella. By contract, a phrase like 'water diplomacy' or 'health diplomacy' at the very least, signals the types of knowledge and expertise likely to be deployed. Hence, the preferred term of this paper is for the better-established term *science diplomacy* (to best accommodate research and scientific enterprise) or for HEI diplomacy (to accommodate diplomatic affairs related to student mobility or university exchanges) recognising that there is a significant array of 'grey areas' between the terms.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to ask who benefits from the use of the term 'knowledge diplomacy' or to ask what purposes this term serves. The current fashion for the term can be traced back to the 2019 study commissioned by the British Council that culminated in the report *Knowledge Diplomacy* (British Council & Knight, 2019). The KD framework and the Report were subsequently rolled out at the Council's *Going Global* annual education conferences. Prior to this report, the term was understood in a much more limited sense as associated to intellectual property (Ryan, 1998).

The British Council – like many public sector organizations facing a tight public fisc – presumably needed to reinvent itself. The 2010 report on Science Diplomacy launched by the Royal Society and AAAS attracted world-wide attention and has achieved considerable traction as a policy narrative. The Knowledge Diplomacy report appears to emulate that earlier process. For the Council, the 'knowledge diplomacy' framework represented a way for the Council to enliven its image, refresh one branch of activities and re-establish its utility for the UK public sector.

For the UK government, the 'knowledge diplomacy' framework becomes a new tool to re-present itself among international constituencies. In a post-Brexit context, the KD framework dovetails with the official government narrative of 'Global Britain' and UK aspirations of international leadership, outside the European Union, in areas of innovation, global services, R&D (research and development) and education.

For HEIs in general, the discourse potentially represents a new way to articulate their societal and economic relevance to both the public at large and their governments. This is especially the case for those UK universities that have been at the forefront positing 'knowledge diplomacy' as a route towards policy impact and relevance in world affairs (University of London Institute in Paris, 2020-22). Adding another layer of professional imagery of the role HEIs as potential diplomats, is perhaps to be expected when HEIs of many countries need to justify their utility to society and economy. HEIs might even be said to have an institutional self-interest in knowledge diplomacy. This is witnessed in the various blog discussions (IIAS-The Blog,2022), seminar series and research programs (University of London Institute in Paris, 2020-22), or other KD initiatives undertaken by HEIs or researchers and staff in them. Such initiatives provide intellectual space for reflection on the role of the university in contemporary world affairs.

From an IR and a policy sciences perspective (with its extensive work on evidence-based policy), the knowledge diplomacy framework raises some troubling questions. Knowledge diplomacy is poised as an alternative to 'soft power'. Following Nye, the latter is presented as tactics of "attraction and persuasion" by states (instead of hard power tactics of dominance and control) for the promotion and self-interest of the state (Šime, 2023). Rather than the pursuit of state "supremacy", knowledge diplomacy is represented as "based on values of reciprocity, mutuality, understanding and compromise": that is, KD is not "framed in a 'power paradigm' like soft power" (British Council & Knight, 2019: 6-7).

Many would agree that international scientific endeavours are indeed based on cooperation while educational processes are based on mutuality and understanding. But this is where KD starts to 'float'; the fungibility of the language and lexicon of diplomacy contributes to the conceptual stretching of its traditional meanings beyond being the activity of state appointed consuls and diplomats, ambassadors and 'high representatives' of MFAs and international organisations. For instance, the concept of "policy ambassadors" – developed in public policy studies of the circulation of governance models and the international diffusion of policy models – is another concept which emphasizes communication and international exchange that can be undertaken by government officials as well as non-state actors (Porto D'Oliveira, 2021). Likewise, there is often use of phrases like 'student ambassador' or 'open science ambassador' in

exchange programs. The ease of appropriating the language of diplomacy, however, does not translate into either diplomatic interaction or positive outcomes in world affairs.

To conclude this section, there is a need to put the politics back in and draw back on the conceptual over-stretching in the KD framework for understanding the role of HEIs or scientists in international relations or world affairs. Knowledge diplomacy is both a homogenising and a depoliticising term. It homogenises the distinct differences contained in older terms such as science diplomacy. Similarly, sector specific understandings of diplomacy recognise the different actors in each that lead to different institutional vectors and policy processes that clearly distinguish sport diplomacy from museum diplomacy or yet again, from vaccine diplomacy.

'Knowledge diplomacy' also papers over the conflict, competition, and confrontations that exist within and between HEIs and scientific communities. That is, conflicts not only in the competitive trade in educational services but also in other areas like the 'talent wars', the league tables, and the jockeying for prestige in university rankings. There are also some hot debates surrounding power structures in scholarship such as raised in the context of decolonising the curriculum. Finally, it must not be forgotten that HEIs, individual students and scholars, or exchange programmes can occasionally become diplomatic problems: the most notable example in recent memory being the case of *Lex CEU* in Hungary.

3. 'Knowledge' Innovations in Asia-Europe Diplomacies

International educational exchange between Europe and Asia is extensive at both the level of policy as well as in the unilateral initiatives of HEIs, donors, research-oriented NGOs, and scientific associations. In other words, the range of 'diplomacy-related' interactions should not be viewed in a limited sense of only diplomatic training and scholarship.

For sure, there are several universities and diplomatic academies in Europe and Asia that have sought to attract both aspirant and early career diplomats into their degree programs. In Europe, there are well known bodies, like the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands and the Maria Therese Academy in Vienna, that provide diplomatic training. Likewise, the College of Europe at the regional level. These bodies usually function with close affiliation to the state even if historically some have private origins. In Asia, traditionally diplomatic academies are closely connected to the MFA and the training of young diplomats is closely guarded within the state.

The growth in numbers and types of 'new diplomat' alongside the broadening of the diplomatic agenda to a wider range of contemporary issues with new digital modalities and relative ease of communications has created a market niche for training programs that are delivered to an international market (not just a constituency of national trainees). These services come from not only MFAs and select educational establishments but also many NGOs and the educational and learning units of international organizations. These diplomatic institutes and academies occupy "an interstitial field"– they have one foot in education, and the other in diplomatic practice

and international relations. That is, these are bodies that transgress the convenient distinctions between state and non-state actors (Kuus, 2022).

The Asia-Europe Foundation is but one key policy instrument in relations between the two regions. It acts as the civil society outreach arm, or interface, of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM – which is an informal "political dialogue forum" between the governments of the two regions). Over the years ASEF has fostered educational exchange projects. For example, with the support of the Swiss Government, and the DiploFoundation (which is a more-or-less independent NGO supported by the Swiss and Maltese Governments), the ASEF runs an annual training event on 'public diplomacy' for diplomatic officials in the region. Designed and managed by Diplo, but delivered along with other experts, the ASEF Public Diplomacy Training encourages peer to peer learning among junior and mid-career diplomats and civil servants. One objective was to increase foreign and domestic publics' awareness of the ASEM process and ASEF. There have been other 'one-off' activities like the Cultural Diplomacy Lab in 2023.

Education is one of the core areas of activity of ASEF. A flagship project is the ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC). Another interstitial area concerns the overlap of education with the Sustainable Development Goals where ARC has produced a report mapping national policies and university practices for ASEM. In yet another interstitial manifestation, ASEF is institutionally hinged to ASEM through the ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC). The ARC is the Official Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting. This has included proposals for capacity training, benchmarking reports and reporting on the network of university and student leaders across 51 Asian and European countries. The Asia-Europe Institute (AEI) at the University of Malaya was also established under the official auspices of ASEM.

In a layered governance architecture, the official intergovernmental ASEM Education Process (AEP) was formed in 2008 and holds meetings biennially where Ministers of Education convene. They discuss the two pillars of activity in creating an ASEM Education Area. One is political involving ministerial commitments. The other is broader involving various education 'stakeholders'.[1] In sum, through ASEF a great deal of educational exchange takes place not only transregionally but interstitially with the Foundation, ASEF, as a hinge or link between the governmental and non-governmental.

On the innovation side, collaborative inter-regional science and technology activities are well developed through the **ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Science and Technology**. The Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI) programme supports the implementation of the EU-ASEAN Dialogue on Green Technology (GreenTech) and Innovation Mapping. Under EREADI, a series of webinars were organised to promote

[1] The most active stakeholder in the AEP is the **Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF),** the only permanent institution of ASEM. **Other stakeholders currently involved** (2024) in the ASEM Education Process are: ASEAN University Network (AUN) , ASEM LLL Hub Secretariat (University College Cork), ASEM-DUO Secretariat, Erasmus Student Network (ESN), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), European External Action Service (EEAS), European Students' Union (ESU), European Training Foundation (ETF), European University Association (EUA), International Association of Universities (IAU), Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre specialising in higher education and development (SEAMEO RIHED), UNESCO, and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). https://asem-education.org/about/asem-education-process/

technology cooperation and transfer, research collaboration and science, technology and innovation (STI) capacity building between the two regions.[2]

Also significant are programs like Horizon Europe, as well as previous framework programs where the EU takes a 'global approach' to research and innovation. Bilaterally, there are also numerous ongoing dialogues and other agreements with Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea and India, amongst others.

Whether ASEF can be re-labelled and categorised as a knowledge diplomacy initiative is debateable. On the one hand, it is difficult to disentangle some of the intricate (financial) connections between ASEF and ASEM. On the other hand, many of the participants in the various projects and events, regard themselves foremost as scholars, students, or scientists, who are engaged primarily in scientific collaboration or educational exchange. Such positioning has often been predicated upon academic independence, or at least distance and autonomy, from governmental and private donors. In ASEF (as well as more generally) scholars and scientists may well exhibit a reluctance to being enrolled in exercises of diplomacy, even 'watered down' ideas of KD.

The EU and governments in both Europe and Asia use "public-centric" tools – for example, educational exchanges, collaborative research programs, innovation networks, scholarships – most of which remain "state-based". In other words, this is an understanding of diplomacy that is a one-way process from governments to publics. Likewise, the European External Action Service (EEAS) adopted the idea of 'science diplomacy' primarily in the guise of it being a tool of public diplomacy. The reverse – of publics informing MFAs or diplomats – is rarely the case.

The desire or capacity, of MFAs or international organizations to incorporate advice, evidence, data, and research cannot be assumed. Public servants and diplomats are not 'empty cyphers' into which knowledge is easily poured. Instead, the EU steers or controls these educational or science activities through their funding mechanisms or by imposing other conditions. This means that it may strangle (what Bajenova 2023 refers to as) "true interactivity and representativeness that would allow for wider publics to become fully active… participants" in public diplomacy.

The science, innovation and education field is rich with examples of the interfaces between diplomacy and knowledge creation, but diplomacy plays out through other kinds of knowledge organizations such as think tanks, dialogue processes and international philanthropic bodies. The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) and the Munich Security Conference are Asian and European examples respectively of regional dialogue processes on defence and security with a heavy think tank and academic or expert presence. Founded by the UK's International Institute for Strategic Studies, SLD is categorised as "track-one-and-a-half diplomacy" (Longhini & Zimmerman, 2021). And while academic experts on security and think tankers are fixtures at these events, their influence is substantially diluted by the primary presence of government and military officials who control the agenda.

[2] Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument; https://euinasean.eu/cooperation/education-research-and-capacity-building/

In civil society among certain NGOs, including their associations and networks, are state-to-non-state as well as non-state to non-state knowledge exchanges. For example, the EU-India Think Tanks Twinning Initiative (TTTI) was launched in 2015 as a public diplomacy initiation of the EU (Winand, 2021). Similarly, since 1997, a scholarly body, the European Alliance for Asian Studies has been a co-operative platform of European institutions specializing in the study of Asia which aims "to build high-quality border-transcending research, teaching and public services, including scholarly networks within Europe and beyond". But an aspiration to be of 'public service' is a far cry from having diplomacy ambitions.

Traditionally, large-scale philanthropy has been very important to international knowledge exchange. For example, German political foundations have been very active in Asia (Ismail & Abadi, 2017). According to *The Economist*, there are 896 billionaires in Asia, more than any other part of the world (America has 746), with a combined $3.4trn in assets in 2023. Disaggregated information on philanthropic engagements between Europe and Asia is very difficult to access as the vast amount of giving is directed to national communities rather than international challenges. Nevertheless, initiatives like the peer exchanges promoted by the China-Europe Philanthropic Leadership Platform promote what they call "global leadership" in this sector with the objective to "Enhance cooperation between Chinese and European foundations".[3]

Likewise, the EurAsia Foundation (from Asia) is an internationally minded body. Its vision statement uses similar language to that of the British Council. The Foundation advocates the "importance of diverse values" and building "awareness through mutual understanding and exchange with people from around the world" albeit "while maintaining its neutral stance as a private organization … away from influences by nations or organizations" (EurAsia Foundation, n.d.). Within the KD framework, the EurAsia Foundation could conceivably be re-branded as a 'knowledge diplomat'. Politically, however, it is not likely to be accepted by the Foundation given the traditional political and cultural attitudes towards diplomacy being the purview of the state throughout Asia.

The above examples are merely illustrative of the diversity of connections between Europe and Asia and in no sense comprehensive. The range of both state-initiated or guided public diplomacy on STI and education in Asia-Europe engagements is deep and diverse but is also complemented by the unilateral initiatives of HEIs, their associations or that of scientific and other bodies. Whether such initiatives deserve the title of 'knowledge diplomacy' is disputed in the next section by drawing attention to some unwarranted assumptions within the KD framework as well as identifying some other analytical lens through which to view Asian-European knowledge engagements.

[3] https://philea.eu/how-we-can-help/peer-learning/peer-exchange-programmes/philanthropic-leadership-platform-china-europe-plp/

4. Educational exchange versus state instrumentalism: two sides of the same coin?

While the educational features of public and cultural diplomacy in fostering peace and security have indeed gained recognition and salience in some scholarly and public policy quarters, its impact is under researched and often over-hyped. This section will raise just two considerations: (i) Competition and statecraft; (ii) power and influence. Undoubtedly, there are numerous benefits arising from scientific cooperation, joint initiatives on innovation or educational exchange but there are also costs to consider and motives to mention.

Competition and Statecraft

Student mobility has long been seen as a mode of educational and cultural exchange (Asada, 2019). It is also, for many countries a lucrative trade in services. The personal pathways of student mobility do not represent knowledge diplomacy. Instead, such movements need to be strategically networked into specific policy ambitions of more powerful actors for such mobility to have the potential for diplomacy. That is, the size and direction of flows of students can be crafted into a tool of soft power.

Erasmus Mundus is one of the most successful educational programs of the European Union. This program provides scholarships to bring graduate students from outside the EU to study in a MA or MSc degree co-delivered by a consortium of (mostly) European universities (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011; Gerards, Schunz, & Damro, 2022). While not designed as a tool for diplomacy, nevertheless the program has 'soft power' outcomes. That is, in projecting European norms and standards and promoting the European Education Area as well as leading to a new external engagement initiative with EU alumni (Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021).

A significant avenue of innovation is via university alliance-building through the Belt and Road Initiative of the People's Republic of China. Rather than seeing the BRI simply as a large infrastructure project, it also has cultural and educational exchange ambitions (Woo, 2023). While there are developmental objectives that promote "connectivity of Asian, European and African continents" (Chou and Demiroyl, 2023: 4), nevertheless there are also geopolitical interests of China that are served by BRI. While BRI has led to several university alliances along the Silk Road, it is also a platform for China to develop or demonstrate its knowledge leadership and/or proffer and instil its alternative vision of world affairs. BRI is about "helping China move from the periphery to the center of the global soft power sphere" and to be "understood as an alternative economic and political model to Western liberal democracies" (Woo, 2023: 689). Although HEIs may proclaim their autonomy or scholarly independence of Chinese Government interests, they cannot subtract themselves, or the KD concept, from their geo-political context, as even Chinese scholars question (Liu *et al*, 2024).

Finally, the notion that educational exchange, knowledge co-production and internationalisation of research leads to peaceful or at least benign outcomes is questionable. While a cosmopolitan perspective underpins 'knowledge diplomacy', cosmopolitan outcomes may well be illusory. Indeed, one NGO – the Scholars at Risk

network – might beg to differ given its mission to protect exiled and politically threatened scholars and to promote academic freedom. Instead, it is necessary to consider how discord can be sown through educational exchange when considering the highly competitive trade of education services, or the race for talent in recruitment of scientists, the censorship and harassment of foreign scholars in certain countries or other issues of academic freedom. For instance, Confucius Institutes throughout Europe have attracted negative attention with accusations from host governments that a few individual members in institutes are engaged in spying, or that the Institute is pressuring locally based Chinese international students (European Parliament, 2019, O'Neill, 2021).

Another factor is the way states regulate foreign funding and/or presence of international foundations and grant programs. This is currently the case in India where amendments to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FRCA) represents a securitized approach to foreign funding with heavy impact on NGOs and think tanks. For instance, the respected Delhi -based Centre for Policy Research had its FRCA license revoked because it was receiving "foreign contributions for 'undesirable purposes'".[4] India is not unique: laws and regulations regarding 'foreign agents' are seen elsewhere around the world.

Knowledge Power and Policy Influence

There is a danger of inflating what are essentially international cultural and educational exchange initiatives into peace projects. That is, 'knowledge diplomacy' is currently a fashionable phrase in policy making around transnational education. But some caution is needed in ascribing substantive impact on world affairs. And this also entails unpacking the distinctive varieties of diplomacy to reveal the very different potentialities for influence, and with whom, that these diplomacies *might* exert.

Of more utility is the concept of 'knowledge power'. In their study of Europe, Young and Ravinet, 2022: 2) advocated *knowledge power* as the "capacity to act in global affairs that allows an actor to affect both relationships and contexts of global governance by mobilizing knowledge." This perspective allows us firstly to escape the homogenizing and de-politicising effect of the 'knowledge diplomacy' framework as horizontal cooperation among equal partners, by reinstating hierarchies of inequities in capacity and resources between countries or among cross-national research teams. Resistances emerge – for instance, protests in Budapest against Fudan University campus which is linked to the BRI (Woo, 2023: 693). It also allows refocusing attention to conflicts over knowledge production and epistemic authority in a post-factual era (Hernandez 2021: 89). Criticisms of "extractive research" or the perpetuation of western epistemologies in north-south science collaborations long mounted by scholars of post coloniality (eg. Nisar, 2023) are now hard to ignore but absent in the KD framework.

Notwithstanding well-established bodies like AEI in Malaysia or the EU Centre at Seoul University amongst many others, it was evident in the (English language) web-search for this paper that there is a more diverse ecology of European based institutes and think tanks of Asian studies than the converse. That is, Asia based institutes of European

[4] *India News*, January 17th, 2024: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/think-tank-cpr-got-foreign-funding-for-undesirable-purposes-sources-4880420

studies. As the EurAsia Foundation (n.d.) also notes: "it goes without saying that studies to date have tended to view Asia from a Western perspective". But this claim needs further empirical validation.

Secondly, Young and Ravinet put an emphasis on *global governance* where the word 'governance' is much more precise and substantive than KD *relations*. A key element in the KD framework is its role "in *strengthening positive and productive relations* between and among countries" (my emphasis, Knight, 2020: 39). Internationalised knowledge relationships are cut off from the governance of other countries or international organizations or multilateral deliberations and summitry. KD floats in a parallel universe to global governance and international relations as understood by IR scholars (Kuus, 2023, Leira, 2018; Higgott & Tercovich, 2021).

Another KD "principle" is that of "reciprocity" and "mutuality" in collaborations that lead to "both collective and context-specific benefits accrued for actors and countries" (Knight, 2020: 39). Such benefits could just as easily be cast as '(global) public goods'. Public goods theory is the traditional theoretical context in which public support and government funding to science and education is considered (Marginson, 2011). In other words, transnational educational and international scientific cooperation contribute to the production or delivery of regional or global public goods more so than diplomacy.

The 'Track 2 diplomacy' or the 'informal diplomacy' of think tanks and HEIs noted above is clearly a field of policy deliberation where some influence may be found. Yet, there is now a sizeable literature on Track 2 (T2) diplomacy which notes that this is a relatively rare or specialised mode of operation (Longhini & Zimmerman, 2021). Very few HEIs are involved in this type of activity. Moreover, it is generally a process where HEIs, or experts from universities, are invited into the process by MFAs or some other authoritative actor like an International Organization. The initiative and the invitation come from government in more of a top-down process where the process is controlled by official actors. Accordingly, within the T2 or informal diplomacy theoretical lens of analysis, knowledge diplomacy would be treated rather more prosaically as Track 3, that is, simple people-to-people international exchange.

University global engagements like contribution to the SDGs need not be labelled as diplomacy. Instead, it is feasible to discuss HEI activities with more common-place and routine phrases like 'external engagement', or to describe university initiatives as 'policy entrepreneurship' rather than as diplomacy (Gerards, Schunz, & Damro, 2022: 1242). The dilemma for diplomacy is that the term become subject to "semantic inflation".

When the Royal Society (2010) examined cases of 'science diplomacy', it was careful to use precise terms and distinguish between the different modalities of this phenomenon (EEAS, 2022). Sometimes seen as the 'progressive front', the first type, "Diplomacy for Science" entails diplomatic action to facilitate international scientific collaboration. For example when the EU and ASEAN negotiate R&D agreements and exchange programmes. Or when governments establish scholarship schemes for foreign students and scholars. This is regular and relatively non-controversial form of assistance to cross-national scientific or educational endeavours.

The second type – "**Science for Diplomacy"** – is the use of science as a soft power to advance diplomatic objectives such as building bridges between nations and creating good will on which diplomatic relations can be built. This is a modality where states and IOs tend to be in the driving seat but sometimes HEIs can take the lead. Like the former, this mode of science diplomacy is oriented towards publics and/or scientific communities.

These two types of science diplomacy are essentially the same as that outlined in the KD definition on page 2 of this paper (see also Knight, 2022). They align with the 'motives' attributed within to KD where KD advocates HEIs and other research and innovation bodies to pull away from the "power paradigm" (Liu *et al,* 2024). When power is subtracted diplomacy becomes a 'floating signifier' and what was once understood as simply 'international education exchange' or 'scientific collaboration', becomes diplomacy.

However, the Royal Society's third modality – "Science in Diplomacy" – occurs when science (or scientists) provide direct support to diplomatic processes by using their scientific advice and evidence to support decision- making. This is certainly less public and less frequent than the other modalities. And this latter form is where political competition may emerge with the desire of policy makers to keep 'science on tap' rather than 'science on top'. That is, power is central to understanding diplomacy. Notwithstanding the "idealistic and normative" nature of education and science, it can be exploited and replaced with "realist and power competition" notions by some countries and political actors (Gultekin, 2021).

5. Conclusion

A cautionary perspective on the use of the word 'diplomacy' in the context of Asian and European knowledge relations has been the focus of this paper. This is not to deny the wealth of practice and partnership that already exists. Yet, the notion of knowledge diplomacy is not a 'new route' for Asia-Europe engagement. It is already a highway of formal intergovernmental relations with many sets of well-trod institutional pathways of exchange and mutuality. Notable from Europe are the research collaborations through Horizon Europe and previous framework programmes as well as the support to science diplomacy given by EEAS and many European or Asian governments. From Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative is an economic and political project of the Chinese state to serve Chinese national interests, But BRI is concurrently, a conduit for information, technology, and other forms of knowledge exchange.

In sum, the knowledge diplomacy framework functions virtue of being a floating signifier. Its encompassing definition that covers higher education, research, technology, and innovation intersects too many domains. The agency and mixed motivations of specific actors and institutions is de-emphasised. Knowledge is disconnected from interests.

Additionally, the KD approach is normatively naïve in its notion that HEIs and other knowledge actors play a role in building and strengthening international relations. KD operates with apolitical assumptions that overlook both the scholarly and political debates over the instrumentalization of knowledge exchange, the threats to academic freedoms and the "sharp power of knowledge" (Gultekin, 2021). KD also de-politicises and hollows-

out the traditional idea of diplomacy which has historically been grounded in the power of the sovereign state. Power is often seen in interstitial settings (Kuus, 2023). Consequently, trying to mark clear boundaries between what is 'knowledge diplomacy' and what is not, defeats an understanding of the power dynamics in play between governance and knowledge.

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