

# Civil Diplomacy and Civil Society Breaking the Traditional Diplomatic Model: A Case Study of Civil Organizations and Civil Diplomacy in Chinese Society

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**Abstract:** Civil society organizations and Civil Diplomacy are some of the important research contents of diplomacy, as well as the emerging diplomatic groups and organizations in the post-epidemic era. Broadly speaking, civil society organizations refer to social intermediary organizations other than government parties, enterprises, and institutions. The development of China's civil diplomacy is a multi-dimensional and multi-level process, that plays an important role in China's diplomatic system, and its development not only reflects the changes in China's relations with the world but also the transformation of China's foreign policy and the construction of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. In the past, national and international organizations that participated in diplomatic activities in the image of the state did not have the figures of civil organizations. After the epidemic, more and more civil organizations express their political positions and values through the power of public opinion and the media to indirectly change the pattern of the international community, and use their power to enhance the soft power of official diplomacy, which has become an indispensable voice and force in today's international community. Here, this paper will take Chinese civil diplomacy and civil society as examples to analyze the reasons, impacts, and prospects of the development of civil diplomacy in international governance.

**Keywords:** Civil diplomacy; Civil society organizations; Social network theory; International relations; Diplomacy

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## 1. The need for transformation of China's diplomatic model in the context of new challenges in global governance

In the context of the post-COVID-19 global era, global governance continues to face many new challenges from anti-globalization ideologies. The most significant causes are technological conflicts, conflicts of interests, cultural conflicts, conflicts of rights, and conflicts of trust. These conflicts have led to a crisis in global governance. Under the trend of globalization, these conflicts not only exist in the spatial dimension but are also objective events in the evolution and enhancement of human civilization.

From an objective point of view, although the extreme right-wing forces in Europe have been curbed to a certain extent as a result of the epidemic, in the aftermath of the epidemic, the lack of economic growth in various countries, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the fragmentation of social identities are challenging and shaking the foundations of global governance and social cohesion. This is causing global governance to face a lot of uncertainty in the course of its future development. In addition to the challenges of the process of international cooperation and the challenges of multilateralism, the negative impact of global governance is also increasing. To a certain extent, the great challenges posed by globalization are themselves a product of globalization. In Western countries, even many middle-class people who used to support globalization have become important forces against it. All these factors have hindered the practice of the concept of sustainable development in the context of globalization advocated by the United Nations, and have posed a new challenge to the traditional mode of diplomacy of other countries such as China. In the post-epidemic era, the global governance system needs to be reformed to adapt to the new global challenges. This issue has a direct bearing on how China, as the world's second-largest economy, conducts its multilateral diplomacy in the post-pandemic era in a shaky and unstable global governance system.

Under the trend of transformation of global governance and national diplomatic model, China must inject new elements into its diplomatic content and diplomatic model if it wants to strengthen its international activities, expand its international influence, shape its public image, and enhance its soft power in the post-pandemic era. Civilian diplomacy is the best answer to China's new diplomatic model, which has become an important link in promoting China's self-expression in the international community and is of far-reaching significance in enhancing China's soft power. It aims to complement official diplomacy through the "bottom-up" path of civic diplomacy and jointly serve the country's overall diplomatic goals. Through its flexible, diverse, multi-channel, and wide-coverage features, it reduces the limitations of information dissemination and makes use of different carriers to maximize the influence on a wider range of people in Western countries, thus better displaying the country's overall diplomatic image, transcending the elite diplomacy-dominated mode of state diplomacy, and better adapting itself to the needs of China's diplomatic transformation and mode innovation.

With the shift of power in the international landscape from "unipolar" to "multipolar", emerging developing powers, especially China, are increasingly becoming the backbone of the current changes in global governance, especially in the promotion of economic globalization, post-economic recovery and other international public issues for discussion. The new dynamics of globalization and the new changes in global governance provide opportunities for the internationalization of Chinese social organizations and the development of civil diplomacy. With the rise and opportunities of state diplomacy, Chinese civil society organizations, social groups, think tanks, and enterprises are increasingly playing an active role in the international arena of global governance through extensive and in-depth participation. Therefore, through flexible and pragmatic civil diplomacy, the country can promote the dissemination of soft power and international cooperation, facilitate civilizational exchanges and mutual understanding, and strengthen social integration and social communication on a global scale. In this process, the government needs to further explore how to make use of innovative and multilateral systems to synergize civic diplomacy with China's soft power building under different factors, to enhance China's voice in global governance, contribute Chinese diplomatic wisdom, and work together with other countries to address the new challenges and risks facing global governance <sup>[1]</sup>.

## **2. Synergies of civil diplomacy in promoting China's soft power building and influence in international governance**

Enhancing soft power is of great significance to any country, including China. Soft power is an important part

of a country's comprehensive national power and international competitiveness, which mainly includes the spreading power of culture, the attractiveness of foreign policy, ideology, and political values. Enhancing soft power is an important strategy in modern international relations, and has a profound impact on a country's long-term development and international status, so it is an important foundation for a country to enhance its international influence and strengthen its international relations. In the post-epidemic era, based on significant changes in the global political landscape, and to contribute to China's program for promoting new changes in the global governance system, civil diplomacy has become an important part of China's development strategy and foreign policy. In this process, civil diplomacy is playing an increasingly important synergistic role in the enhancement of national soft power.

First, from the perspective of enhancing mutual trust and communication power, civic diplomacy is conducive to driving two kinds of resources both local and broad. Through rich and varied exchange platforms, it can achieve resource sharing, open up channels of communication and cooperation, and enhance mutual trust between countries. By tapping into these resources embedded in various ethnic groups, social organizations, university think tanks, civic groups, enterprises, and industry associations, comprehensive, scientific, and integrated planning, and fully mobilizing the enthusiasm of all kinds of main bodies, it will be possible to provide a steady stream of shared resources for promoting the construction of China's soft power of mutual trust and communicative power with other countries. China is currently achieving practical results worth studying at the level of civil diplomacy through colleges and universities within its borders as carriers. Colleges and universities have played an important role in international communication through their professional, talent, organizational, and network advantages. These practical achievements have not only enhanced the global image and reputation of universities but also played an important role in spreading Chinese culture, ideas, and wisdom.

Secondly, in the construction of "institutional attractiveness", it is possible to provide Chinese programs and Chinese wisdom for solving global economic problems through civil diplomacy education, expanding influence, and enabling the Western world to have a more comprehensive understanding of the Chinese system. China's economy in the post-world market economy era is still the number one engine of world economic growth despite the slowdown. With developed countries constantly facing the risk of recession and crisis, China's economic development model is becoming more and more attractive to the rest of the world. Civil diplomacy at the economic level can have a cascading effect on other factors such as international politics. In this process, Chinese enterprises and social organizations, which have continued to expand business opportunities in the post-epidemic period, have demonstrated China's economic development model through civil diplomacy to provide lessons for local economic development, thus enhancing the institutional attractiveness of China's soft power building. For example, in December 2022, when China lifted control of the COVID-19 epidemic, the governments of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian began to organize charter flights for foreign trade enterprises to go overseas to attract business. In addition to this, the epidemic has facilitated the combination of the internet, big data, and the traditional foreign trade industry, improving the online level of transaction aggregation, customs declaration, and clearance. China seized this opportunity to expand the influence of e-commerce and strengthen the development of online trade through civil diplomacy behaviors. The global business-to-consumer cross-border e-commerce transaction volume has grown from about \$650 billion in 2018 to about \$1 trillion in 2020, of which China leads the global cross-border e-commerce, with a trading volume of about \$280 billion in 2020, which accounts for 28% of the global share.

Thirdly, in terms of enhancing cultural influence, civil exchanges based on traditional Chinese culture can be promoted through civil diplomacy. Chinese culture has believed since ancient times that the world should be a harmonious whole, and the spirit of harmony has promoted the intermingling of Chinese and foreign cultures,

as evidenced by the ancient mission of Zhang Sai to the Western Regions, and today's Belt and Road forum. At present, China is cooperating with Asian and European countries to promote the cultural aspects of the Belt and Road community. Folk diplomacy based on cultural exchanges such as the Confucius Institute, spontaneous education by Chinese students, and inviting foreign artists to China to exchange performances, and so on, is in line with the mainstream values of the populations of various countries in the post-epidemic era, promotes exchanges and mutual understanding between different cultures, expands the influence of civil diplomacy, and provides more public opinion influence for the construction of China's soft power. It also provides more influence on public opinion and helps to build a more harmonious international relationship.

Fourthly, in terms of international governance, civil diplomacy, and civil society organizations can provide more diverse voices and value positions. The key lies in the fact that these organizations are deeply involved in life, understand the value needs of the general public, and are in a better position to express the voices and claims of the people. They are usually not bound by governments or bureaucracies and can be more flexible in coming up with innovative ideas and solutions. Such innovative thinking helps drive international governance forward and adapt to a changing world. In addition, civil diplomacy is relatively low-risk, and many civil society organizations have deep expertise in specific areas, such as environmental protection, human rights, health, and social welfare. They can provide professional insights, advice, rational exchanges, and more feasible options and rational thinking for international governance, helping to improve international governance policies and practices and strengthening the top-level and coordinated design of international governance <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **3. Prospects for the future communication of civil diplomacy**

At present, China is carrying out civil diplomacy not only in the bilateral sphere but also in numerous regional and international multilateral diplomatic occasions in the future. Based on the multi-tracking of communication platforms, it will make full use of various multilateral public diplomacy forums and expositions to broaden the areas of cooperation in which civil diplomacy can be showcased, expanding from the traditional areas of culture, education, science, and technology to a wide range of areas such as environmental protection, social development, and public health, such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the World Health Assembly and so on. Through these platforms, Chinese civil representatives can exchange views, share experiences, and make suggestions with their international counterparts, demonstrate China's positive attitude and contribution to global issues, and actively guide international public opinion. While a single mode of civil diplomacy may only involve specific fields or groups, pluralistic development means that more social forces are involved in international exchanges, thus enabling a more comprehensive display of a country's culture, values, and social development. The expansion of civil diplomacy from a single dimension to multi-track civil communication activities will become an important platform to complement the country's overall diplomacy in the future. The Chinese government should also encourage and entrust more civil society organizations and individuals to participate in foreign activities and give them adequate guidance and training. Also, the transparency and inclusiveness of international decision-making can be promoted through extensive civic participation, which will help strengthen multilateralism in the international community, promote the democratization of international relations, and enable more stakeholders to have a voice in international affairs.

In addition, in terms of the networked outcomes of the development of civil diplomacy, civil diplomacy is using communication networks to incubate more influential diplomatic outcomes in support of national policies or international exchanges. Manuel Castor, a representative of social network theory, suggests that a globalized society is essentially an information society constructed by networks, which gives new meaning

to networks. The spread of networked logic has fundamentally changed the operations and outcomes of production, experience, power, and cultural processes. There are four main core factors in social network theory respectively, namely nodes, edges, network density, and mediated intermediation. Nodes represent individuals or organizations in a social network, and edges represent connections or relationships between nodes, and it can be seen here that such connections are the manifestations of civic diplomacy. Network density refers to the ratio between the number of links that exist in a network and the maximum number of links that could exist, and a network with a high density means that there are more direct links between members of the network. It can be understood that the country is a density, if the country supports the development of civil diplomacy, then the development of civil diplomacy groups in the country will be more and more and also the intuitive expression of the country's diplomatic image is in line with the country's diplomatic policy objectives. Mediated intermediation refers to the extent to which a node acts as a bridge to other nodes in a network. A node with high intermediary centrality plays an important role in the network because it controls the flow of information. It can be understood that this intermediary is a country, an international organization, or an entire international community. This is because they are in the best position to directly control and influence the development of the civil diplomacy community as a node.

In recent years, the rise of city-based civic diplomacy and the emergence of transnational city coalitions have been a concentrated manifestation of the networked nature of communication. City-based civic diplomacy was initially characterized by friendly city exchanges and cultural and economic exchanges. Later, as the influence of citizen diplomacy expanded, it manifested itself more as inter-city exchanges on behalf of countries, thus better serving multilateral exchanges between countries. Several alliances are now approaching mature development, such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Alliance (C40) which aims to address environmental issues such as climate change and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Asian Cities Health Alliance (ACHA) is a network that aims to raise the voice and action of Asian cities on global health issues. European Cities for Local Democracy (ECLD) is a network of European cities working to promote local democracy and civic engagement. It strengthens links between local governance and civil society through city-to-city cooperation projects. Global Healthy Cities Alliance (GHCA) aims to improve global public health through city-to-city cooperation. These cases demonstrate how cities can engage in city-based civic diplomacy through transnational alliances and networks with diverse social issues. Inter-city cooperation not only helps to solve commonly faced problems but also enhances the influence and voice of cities in the international arena. Through this form of civil diplomacy, cities can share resources, knowledge, and technology, contributing to the advancement of global governance and the development of international relations<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In short, the development of civil diplomacy in the post-epidemic era is a comprehensive systematic project. Based on summing up the international practical experience of civil diplomacy, it is crucial to promote the development of subject diversification, field diversification, and networking in the practice of civil diplomacy to form a multi-level and three-dimensional diplomatic system, taking into account the specific national conditions of each country. After establishing good diplomatic goals and guidelines, it should start from the innovative mode of the national diplomatic system and process, and effectively strengthen civil diplomacy through government support, education, training, and so on. It should give full play to the intention of civil diplomacy as the secondary image of national diplomacy, to promote personnel exchanges, establish cooperative partnerships, strengthen multilateral participation, and so on, and better contribute to the overall diplomacy of the country. In

this way, it can promote people-to-people exchanges, establish cooperative partnerships, strengthen multilateral participation, and so on, better serve the country's overall diplomacy and elite diplomacy, give full play to the value of pluralistic relations, and promote international understanding and cooperation, to enhance the country's soft power and international image. In the aftermath of the epidemic, countries must enhance their self-image, consolidate their international status, strengthen the power and dissemination of civil diplomacy, and realize the greatest impact on their comprehensive national power and breakthroughs in their national governance process.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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