

Diaspora Diplomacy: A Gateway to Influence, Power, and Reputation

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“There have emerged new geographies of connectivity, which are remaking the relationship between states and citizens. In this context, diaspora is revitalised as a living transnational network that extends nation-state capacities and is now widely viewed by governments as a soft power resource – ministries, institutions, and programmes have been created to engage diaspora as agents of diplomatic and development goals.

At the same time, diasporas are actively engaging arenas of transnational commerce, communications and politics in ways that disrupt normative ideas and practices of global governance, reflecting the polylateral relationships of power in an increasingly networked world.”¹

Overview

Diaspora diplomacy is the participation of transnational communities and individuals in systems of global governance and international relations, viewing diasporas as increasingly deterministic actors in the diplomatic landscape.

It is widely acknowledged that new thinking, new actors, and new tools of systemic global cohesion are needed to futureproof genuinely equitable systems of global governance for peace and prosperity. This article contends that diaspora diplomacy is one such area of new thinking and agency for global cohesion.

Diaspora diplomacy has been earmarked as “an emerging and increasingly important dimension of international and transnational relations.”² Yet, there remains a critical lack of quality analysis on what it is and how it can deliver not just in national contexts but also generate impact through international relations and global governance. This primer commits to advancing discussion across these levels - national and international - based on our collective experience of working in over 80 countries on diaspora engagement.

This article is by no means envisioned as an exhaustive treatment of this emerging diplomatic phenomenon. It is designed as an incubation of explorative analysis to spark exchange and to engage the increasingly important role that diaspora diplomacy can play as a positive disruptor of systems of global governance.

Therefore, aligned with this process of analytical discovery, the views expressed within this article are those of the co-authors. They are offered in the hope that they will encourage debate and exchange on this emergent area of diaspora work.

¹ Liam Kennedy, “Introduction,” in Routledge International Handbook of Diaspora Diplomacy, 1st ed. New York and London: Routledge International, 2022.

² According to Paul Sharp, Professor of Political Science, University of Minnesota Duluth, in his review of the Routledge International Handbook of Diaspora Diplomacy.

Energising the increasingly deterministic diplomatic role of diasporas in a more turbulent world

The world is evermore defined by prolific forces of change, mobility, and volatility. These dynamics are determining how systems of global governance are being framed and operationalised.

The harsh reality is that the foundational concepts and tools of such systems are seen by many as lacking authenticity, agility, and equality in advancing shared global dividends and influence. The world is now navigating through an age of geopolitical turbulence.

The famed management consultant Peter Drucker once noted, “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

As Kennedy notes above, there are now new geographies of connectivity - both real and digital - which are forcefully reshaping how systems of global governance are designed and delivered. Yesterday’s logic is no longer fully equipped for this new dawning for global governance. In relation to diaspora engagement, this will demand more nuance in how we frame and work through the topic. This article works to advance this innovation by unpacking the relationship between diaspora diplomacy and diaspora engagement.

¹ Liam Kennedy, “Introduction,” essay, in Routledge International Handbook of Diaspora Diplomacy, 1st ed. New York and London: Routledge International, 2022.

² According to Paul Sharp, Professor of Political Science, University of Minnesota Duluth.

Diaspora Engagement and Diaspora Diplomacy are not the same thing

Diaspora engagement is a booming industry. Various entities such as the UN Migration Agency (IOM) and the European Union Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF) estimate that over 100 states now actively engage their diasporas. For example, the EUDiF has identified 439 central government diaspora institutions active in 110 countries.³

The focus of diaspora engagement tends to be limited to national contexts, often on first-generation migrant contributions to their country of origin's national development. Diaspora diplomacy, on the other hand, describes the catalytic potential of engaging a more diverse array of transnational communities and individuals as deterministic diplomatic actors and agents of change for their countries of origin, heritage, affinity, and residence.

How diaspora diplomacy operationalises nationally-focused diaspora engagement

While actions to engage diasporas for national development have a deep record of impact when delivered through an integrated and systemic approach, such processes often fail if this approach is not in place. One reason is the lack of attention given to diaspora diplomacy and its central role in the transition from diaspora policy design to implementation through effective diplomatic processes. Our experience is that the traditional approach to diaspora engagement, driven by fragmented and “projectised” approaches that too often characterise the international development system, can see states excessively focus on institutional and policy development. Such approaches often involve international aid-funded organisations structuring their support to country of origin governments through short-term, timebound and output-focused (as opposed to outcome-focused) projects.

They seldom incentivise the building of long-term, sustainable networks of trust and influence required to operationalise their diaspora policies. This is a challenge recognised by the sector itself with recent institutional strategies by leading actors advocating for a reframing of such approaches through different frameworks and financing options.⁴

Consistency and continuity are at the heart of any form of relationship building but are elevated in a diaspora context where such cultivation is paramount to success. These dynamics are not best served by approaches based on fragmented methodologies. This is why a transformative decision for governments to succeed in diaspora engagement is to invest their own human and financial resources into diaspora diplomacy. It is the signal of consistency and continuity to the diaspora to make them willing to **build relationships, not transactions, with home.**

³ Fanny Tittel-Mosser, A Typology of Diaspora Engagement Institutions (Brussels: European Union Global Diaspora Facility/International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2023).

⁴ A good example of the argument for reframing such approaches is: Policy Framework: Driving Progress Beyond Programs (Washington DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2023).

How diaspora diplomacy enables countries to project power and influence globally

Furthermore, limiting diaspora engagement to the national country of origin context is short-sighted for many countries in the networked geopolitical world. It is not just diaspora engagement's domestic policy impacts that are important. The countries that have thrived at scale in diaspora engagement have also embraced the foreign policy impacts that diaspora engagement can bring.

This opportunity is blended through evolving connotations of power in the networked age. The formative work of Prof. Anne-Marie Slaughter on power in the networked age helps evolve understandings of diaspora as smart power, or "people-to-people" power. Slaughter argues that in the networked age of the 21st century, "the measure of power is connectedness."⁵ Power is now networked.

In his leading treatment of soft power, Joseph S. Nye describes soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." He argues that when a country's policies are "seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."⁶ Diasporas are natural repositories of soft and smart power to help build the legitimacy of policy in the eyes of others.

Furthermore, Nicholas Cull's refinement of soft power to focus on reputational security is a timely signalling of the reputational impact that diasporas can bring through foreign policy.⁷ These linkages between domestic and foreign policy impacts pinpoint the necessity for governments to embrace diaspora diplomacy both for domestic development agenda and international relations. This necessity is only amplified when situated within the increasingly contested and complex arenas that such policy must now contend with.

What Diaspora Diplomacy can do to operationalise diaspora engagement in national development

- Build the trust required to implement diaspora policies.
- Develop long-term diaspora networks that convert to increased diaspora capital transfers including economic, human, cultural, and other forms of capital.
- Engage diaspora leaders and organisations as co-creators and implementers of diaspora engagement.

What internationally focused Diaspora Diplomacy can do?

- Increase access to economic, security and other forms of intelligence.
- Identify and broker market opportunities through networks of trust and influence.
- Amplify soft power by projecting national values, culture and interests.
- Identify and counter threats to own citizens emanating from hostile states' weaponisation of diaspora diplomacy.

⁵ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January/February 2009): 94–113.

⁶ Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁷ Nicholas John Cull, *Reputational Security: Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

Whilst diaspora diplomacy is central to bridging design and delivery of diaspora engagement, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy, this article contends that this is just one piece of the diaspora diplomacy potential. In addition to diaspora diplomacy operationalising nationally-focused diaspora engagement, diaspora diplomacy within the context of international relations is about what diaspora diplomacy can do for relationships not just between states and between citizenry of states but for relationships and impacts across the multitude of actors that now comprise the diplomatic landscape.

This critical extension into the international relations domain accelerates new diplomatic questions for diaspora work, such as the role of states that are receiving countries of diaspora. This was picked up recently by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in his remarks at the launch of President Biden's Advisory Council on Diaspora Engagement in the U.S. when he astutely correlated the diversity brought forward by the African diaspora as a unique edge for U.S. diplomacy in meeting the challenges they face globally. He noted that,

“We want the best people for our diplomacy, and we want a department that actually reflects the country that it represents. This isn’t just a matter of doing the right thing; it’s doing the smart thing. We’re operating in an incredibly diverse world at a time where there’s a greater multiplicity and complexity of challenges than ever before, certainly in the 30 years that I’ve been involved in this.

The greatest advantage we have in operating in that world, the greatest advantage we have in actually advancing American values and American interests, is our own diversity. And so if we’re shortchanging ourselves by leaving that diversity off the team and off the playing field, it’s not right and it’s not good for America.”⁸

⁸ For a transcript of this speech, please see <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-swearing-in-ceremony-for-the-presidents-advisory-council-on-african-diaspora-engagement/>.

Case Study /

Internationally-focused diaspora diplomacy in action:
President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement
in the United States.

In September 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden established an Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement (PAC-ADE). The PAC-ADE aims to enhance dialogue between U.S. officials and the African diaspora. The 12 members include individuals who have distinguished themselves in government, sports, creative industries, business, academia, social work, and faith-based activities.

The White House's communications emphasised the African diaspora's foundational role in the country's partnership with Africa, as well as the PAC-ADE's objective to "provide invaluable guidance to reinforce cultural, social, political, and economic ties between the U.S. and Africa, and promote trade, investment, and educational exchanges between the U.S. and Africa."⁹ The Executive Order enacting the new body links the PAC-ADE's work to the U.S. Government's Africa-focused foreign and development policy initiatives, such as the U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰

The President's initiative resonates strongly with the internationally-focused diaspora diplomacy approach by leveraging the unique role of Americans of African heritage as diplomatic actors to reinforce U.S.-Africa relations.

Diaspora influence on established state-led areas of diplomacy

Other areas of normative diplomatic theory have also unearthed the impactful disruptive power of diasporas. Areas such as cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and public diplomacy have become increasingly influenced by diasporas. Work in these areas in partnership with diasporas amplify the fact that the state now represents just one of a multitude of actors within diplomacy. The agency, actors, and arenas of diplomacy, much like the wider world, are witnessing a pace of change that is challenging the primacy of the state in diplomatic engagements.

⁹ "President Biden Announces the Inaugural Members of the President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement in the United States," The White House, September 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/26/president-biden-announces-the-inaugural-members-of-the-presidents-advisory-council-on-african-diaspora-engagement-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=In%20accordance%20with%20Executive%20Order,the%20continent%20and%20the%20Caribbean.>

¹⁰ "Executive Order on Establishing the President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement in the United States" (2023).

The urgency for states to prioritise diaspora diplomacy

In this fast-changing diplomatic world, states require globally connected allies and friends. Diasporas are emerging front and centre in that movement as gauged through the assertion that diasporas now play a “multifaceted, complex, and critical role [of diasporas] in international diplomacy and politics.”¹¹

It is through these multifaceted, complex, and critical roles that the proposition emerges that the time is now to embrace diaspora diplomacy not as a supplementary practice in support of cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and other important diplomatic processes, but to view diaspora diplomacy as a unique diplomatic innovation. This requires a transformative shift in how the relationship between diaspora engagement and diaspora diplomacy is viewed.

In the same vein, diaspora diplomacy is not only about the role of diplomacy in engaging diasporas; it is also about the role of diasporas in diplomacy. When states nurture bidirectional positive relationships with their diasporas, they gain access to networks of influence and affluence, as well as different forms of intelligence. By way of example, the Copenhagen Goodwill Ambassadors programme, by activating a network of prominent diaspora Danes across industries, has given Denmark and its capital city access to market opportunities, whilst raising their profile on the world stage.

By leveraging diasporas' cultural mediation capabilities and geographic spread, energising the role of diasporas in diplomacy can amplify countries' - especially smaller countries' - influence on the world stage. Contestations of some of the foundational theories and values of diplomacy already shared in this article, signalled by increasing conflict and tensions around the world, reflect the emerging reality that diplomacy needs new paradigms of mutuality and courage. Diaspora diplomacy is one such paradigm that can reinvigorate these foundations to be a diplomatic force for good in countering such trends.

Unlocking new state-to-state conversations

An additional strand of internationally-focused diaspora diplomacy sees states develop relationships with other states based on diaspora engagement as a shared priority. In this respect, we have seen Korea and Nigeria initiate a partnership together,¹² following the former's recent establishment of a diaspora agency¹³; while Ireland has hosted the first Global Diaspora Summit in 2022 to bring states together to work on diaspora engagement. This resulted in the Dublin Declaration which is a shared agenda for future cooperation on diaspora engagement endorsed by multiple national governments and representative bodies such as the African Union.¹⁴ This is an example of diplomacy through diaspora engagement. The topic of diaspora can

¹¹ According to Amelia Arsenault as provided in review of the Routledge International Handbook of Diaspora Diplomacy.

¹² Michael Olugbode, “South Korea Seeks Partnership With Nigeria on Diaspora Affairs,” Arise News, July 11, 2023, <https://www.arise.tv/south-korea-seeks-partnership-with-nigeria-on-diaspora-affairs/>.

¹³ Ji-hyoung Son, “Bill Gets Cabinet Nod to Create Agency for Korean Diaspora,” The Korea Herald, February 28, 2023, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230228000628>.

¹⁴ The Summit Report, authored by Loksan Harley and published by the International Organization for Migration, is available at: https://www.idiaspora.org/en/learn/resources/public-information-materials/global-diaspora-summit-report?fbclid=IwAR1PYayvyPFONSiuYZyCZWxmglA28Kvt49eYWTqLQ_xAjb-p5Ewu_iLYci4.

serve as a key diplomatic bridge builder, unlocking diplomatic conversations and affinities between countries that may otherwise have few obvious commonalities.

It is likely that there is an imbalance in seeing diaspora diplomacy merely as the subset within diaspora engagement. In treating it as its own practice and process, in need of critical analysis and discovery, diaspora diplomacy can be energised to build impact at the national and global levels.

Meeting this realisation with a new breed of approach and action on diaspora diplomacy is a fresh opportunity when you consider the scope and reach of the diasporic phenomenon. However, it is important to acknowledge that this may also bring some challenges along the way.

Hostile forms of diaspora diplomacy

Whilst the aforementioned new geographies of connectivity augment positive diasporic connections to their homelands, they also enable state monitoring, intimidation and censorship. In particular, the digital channels that are rightly seen as emerging ways to enable diaspora-homeland connections, such as the development of diaspora news media and social media groups, are being manipulated by some states to extend censorship and authoritarian control transnationally. *The Economist* and academic sources have documented such troubling forms of state overreach.^{15 16}

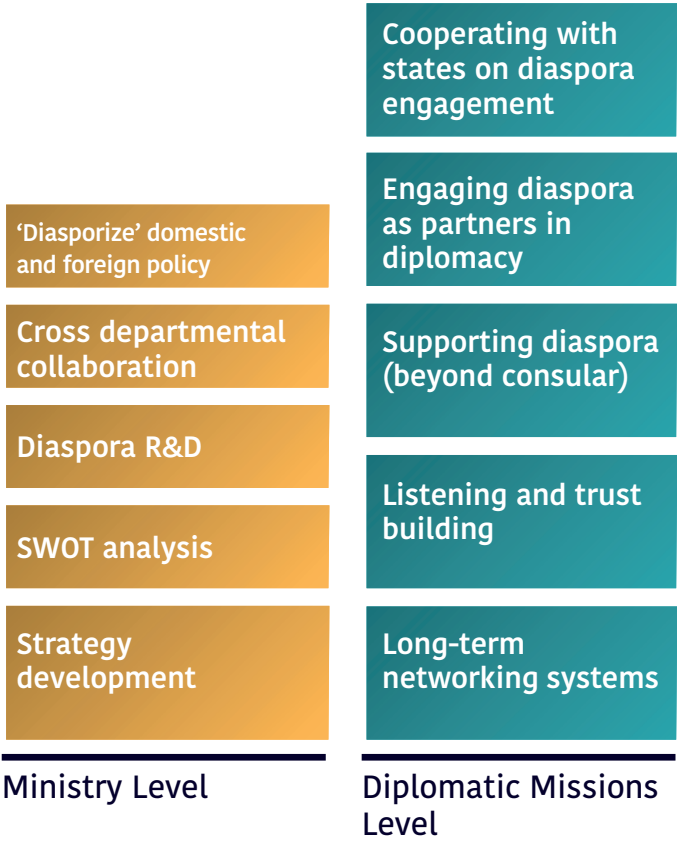
These worrisome developments imply both security threats at home and abroad for countries of residence in particular, including for their diasporic citizenry, who may be considered the targets or even vehicles of campaigns of misinformation and disinformation in today's digital age. It is thus vital that governments not only explore the potential of diaspora diplomacy to support their own domestic and foreign-policy objectives, but also understand the policy implications of other states' potential weaponisation of diaspora diplomacy. In many ways, these dynamics further amplify the necessity of effective diaspora diplomacy when situated within the realms of national security.

¹⁵ Dana M. Moss, "Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring," *Social Problems* 63, no. 4 September 19, 2016: 480–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw019>.

¹⁶ "Autocracies Are Exporting Autocracy to Their Diasporas," *The Economist*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/02/29/autocracies-are-exporting-autocracy-to-their-diasporas>.

Next steps for governments

Given this increasingly deterministic role of diasporas in international relations, diaspora diplomacy must be front and centre of governments’ diplomatic efforts. This underscores the pressing need to develop a range of diaspora diplomacy building blocks (see visual) which will likely evolve depending on your entry point and level of experience in diaspora diplomacy:



These building blocks require action at the ministry and diplomatic-mission level, considering both the strategic implications of diaspora diplomacy as well as the central role of embassies, consulates, trade offices, and other public entities as frontline interfaces for diaspora engagement.

At the ministry level, foreign ministries can build diaspora considerations into their strategic frameworks to unleash the power of their diasporas across diplomatic domains. This must be preceded by a thorough audit of the country’s diaspora-related SWOT analysis, as well as credible R&D into the country’s diasporas to understand the key questions of who they are, where they are, and what they are doing. Many aspects of diaspora diplomacy cut across policy areas, such as culture, trade, and investment. They thus require collaboration across government departments. The interior ministry needs to also be engaged to monitor the types of threats described previously, in which hostile states weaponise diaspora diplomacy.

At the level of diplomatic missions, states need to equip embassies and consulates to interface with diaspora leaders, organisations, and networks. At the core of this is ensuring best in class policy development and best in class training on diaspora diplomacy for staff. It is imperative to build out an agile architecture of diaspora engagement cutting across institutions, sectors, technical processes, and soft skills for success in diaspora diplomacy and, by extension, diaspora engagement.

The agility of this architecture speaks to the long-term commitment required to build success in diaspora diplomacy as a key gateway to influence, power, and reputation. It also recognises the reality that diasporas are fluid communities and opportunities will evolve across time. Finally, this architecture reflects the fundamental factor for success for many governments in diaspora diplomacy which is positioning the diaspora as front and centre of their domestic and foreign policy. Such an architecture can equip governments with the processes, skills, and time to not just build relationships with and through diasporas but also the institutional memory to build outcomes of scale.

It is through the lens of diaspora diplomacy that the scaling of success for national development focused diaspora engagement will be accessed. Beyond this and with a global mandate, it is through the practice of a nuanced diaspora diplomacy that a new paradigm of diplomatic cooperation can be built to counter an increasingly worrisome politics of division taking root in international relations. This is an opportunity for diplomatic and development cooperation that must be seized.

About the Authors

If you have any questions regarding diaspora diplomacy and diaspora engagement strategies, please feel free to contact Martin Russell or Loksan Harley, see details below.



Martin Russell is the founder of Global Diaspora Insights which provides advisory, research, policy, and training services on diaspora engagement for a range of clients across the public sector, private sector, and third sector. He serves as an advisor at The Networking Institute, sits on the Advisory Board of Ireland Reaching Out, and is a member of the Transition Assistance Practice Group at the Institute for Integrated Transitions.

Martin has collaborated on diaspora engagement in over 50 countries. He has a varied publication record across the academic, operational, and policy landscapes including several diaspora policies and strategies. His most recent publication was *Diaspora Philanthropy: Unlocking New Portals for Diplomacy and Development* in the first edition of the Routledge International Handbook of Diaspora Diplomacy.

In 2022, he also participated on the core planning team to deliver the first-ever Global Diaspora Summit co-hosted by the Government of Ireland and the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations migration agency. Martin completed his PhD, *Diaspora Strategies and Conflict Transformation*, at the UCD Clinton Institute where his research focused on the role of the Irish diaspora in the Northern Ireland Peace Process in the areas of diaspora media, diaspora philanthropy, and diaspora politics.

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Loksan has conducted research and advised governments on diaspora engagement in 30+ countries across Africa, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Loksan is also the founder and host of the Migration and Diaspora Podcast, a fast-growing podcast about all things migration and diaspora. He serves on the Executive Leadership Council of the African Diaspora Network, a Silicon Valley-based nonprofit committed to engaging the African diaspora. Loksan holds a BA in economics from McGill University and an MSc in public policy and management from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he has also lectured on migration policy.

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