

# Why Cultural Diplomacy Is More Relevant—And More Challenging—Than Ever

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## ABSTRACT

*The authors, both violinists and founders of cultural diplomacy organizations, relate the challenges of conducting meaningful cultural diplomacy during a pandemic. Their work included video collaborations bringing together musicians from North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia; in-person work in the remote Sierra Tarahumara mountains of northern Mexico; and a unique project to promote the sustained livelihood and increased access of freedom and security of 326 Afghan musicians.*

## INTRODUCTION

Two of the events of the 21st century that had the greatest impact on world history were the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Boston University, 2021) and the current pandemic. Although very different, these two events re-ordered how societies interact with each other, had profound impacts on how people and societies protect themselves (whether from terrorism or disease), and exacerbated the deterioration of global trust, hardening the cultural, religious, national, and ethnic (Hswen et al., 2021) barriers we created for ourselves.

The authors of this paper both founded cultural diplomacy organizations in which music soars effortlessly over those barriers, affirming our common humanity. During the pandemic, they frequently worked together, despite the differences in their organizations' history, in order to answer a seemingly impossible question: how can cultural diplomacy continue to forge connections between people, when most contact between people remains risky to their health due to the highly communicable nature of COVID-19?

## CULTURES IN HARMONY

William had just started studying violin at The Juilliard School in New York in 2001 when Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked planes, crashing them into the World Trade Center. Five days later, he played the violin for soldiers returning from a long day of clean-up work at the World Trade Center site, often referred to as “Ground Zero.”

Seeing how meaningful music was at that difficult time changed his life, but also led him to speculate regarding factors that could explain the tragedy of September 11, arriving at the hypothesis that the pace of globalization has surpassed our ability to grow in empathy. Cultural exchange can help us connect with people on the other side of the world, people very different from ourselves. So, William started studying the field of cultural diplomacy, which has a long and rich history.

In the twentieth century, many countries saw a need to underwrite exchanges based on the arts, culture and education to celebrate both our differences and what we share. The United Kingdom founded the British Council (n.d.) in 1940 to create in a country overseas a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding of the people of this country, of their philosophy and way of life, which will lead to a sympathetic appreciation of British foreign policy, whatever for the moment that policy may be and from whatever political conviction it may spring (n.d., para. 6).

The United States entered the game by founding the United States Information Agency in 1953, eventually folding it into the State Department in 1999 (Arndt, 2005). France has the Alliance Française, Spain has the Instituto Cervantes, Germany has the Goethe-Institut, and China has the Confucius Institute, among others. Private cultural diplomacy organization, focusing on people-to-people exchanges across cultural and national barriers, also exist: the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy defines the pursuit for which it exists as a course of actions, which are based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and beyond. Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by either the public sector, private sector or civil society (n.d., para. 4).

In November 2001, just after the Taliban lost control of Afghanistan, a 16-year-old named Ajmal from Jalalabad told the *New York Times*: “We are searching for any kind of music. It’s been six years since I heard music. There are no words to explain the happiness I think I will feel when I hear it (Weiner, 2001, para. 14).” His words caused William to wonder what the impact on Ajmal’s perception of the USA would be if an

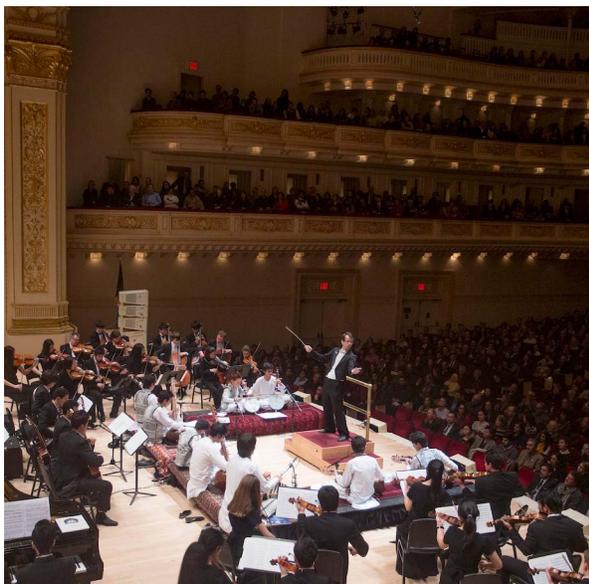
American were to be the first person to play music for him. Accordingly, he attempted to get the State Department interested in sending him there but was rebuffed. He would have to design and implement such cultural diplomacy projects on his own, not knowing at the time that his dream of going to Afghanistan would be fulfilled nine years later.

In 2005, William founded Cultures in Harmony (CiH) to promote cultural understanding through music. Since then, the organization has carried out more than 40 projects in sixteen countries, from Pakistan to Cameroon. The organization has taught young musicians in Tunisia, collaborated with folk musicians in Turkey, and taught composition to the Yoro tribe in the middle of the jungle in Papua New Guinea. Their first project in Mexico in 2007 saw them give master classes to members of the youth orchestras of Mexico City and at the Escuela Superior de Música, where the authors of this article first met.

To more completely incorporate cultural diplomacy into his career, William applied to teach music at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) (n.d.), founded by Dr. Ahmad Sarmast. In 2010, he became the first foreign teacher at ANIM, a project funded by the World Bank (2012). Every day teaching Afghan girls and boys the violin was an opportunity for William to connect across a seemingly vast cultural chasm while fighting the anti-music principles of the Taliban. During their first period in power, from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban prohibited the study and performance of music, even outlawing the act of listening to recorded music, famously stringing cassette tapes from trees (Armangue, 2021; Wroe, 2001).

Dr. Sarmast asked William to found the Afghan Youth Orchestra, the first in Afghanistan’s history where boys and girls would play side by side (Rubin & Wakin, 2013). After four years in

Afghanistan, William moved to Latin America. Cultures in Harmony continued its work connecting Muslim and non-Muslim populations until 2018, the most recent year when they sent a group of teachers to Tunisia. The motivation remained the same: to bridge the divisions etched into the world's consciousness on a brilliant September morning, seventeen years earlier, in that first event that defined the present century.



**Figure 1. William Harvey conducts the Afghan Youth Orchestra in a sold-out concert at New York's Carnegie Hall on February 12, 2013**

## PÉPEM ART ASSOCIATION

Fernanda left Mexico for Europe to study violin performance, violin pedagogy, and choir and ensemble conducting: first in Italy in 2008, then in Austria in 2010 at the Universität Mozarteum Salzburg. After many years of living abroad and having experienced firsthand how music and art in the context of intercultural exchange allow communication and social evolution, she founded Péepem Art Association in 2018 to promote intercultural exchange through music and art.

Its first major project, called ArtisTeach, brought eight Mexican music students to Europe for three weeks in January 2019, first for a week in northern Italy, then two weeks in Salzburg, where they took master classes, lessons, instrumental pedagogy workshops, and played in chamber music concerts and a string orchestra. In the process, they got to know Austrian culture and interacted with host families (Péepem Art, 2022).

In November of the same year, Péepem Art, supported by Foro Cultural de Austria en México, (Clases Maestras, n.d.) the Mexican Embassy in Austria, and the Music Faculty of the Autonomous National University (UNAM), sent three Austrians—one teacher and two students—from the Mozarteum University to Mexico. The teacher gave master classes and joined the two students to interact with Mexican musicians as soloists, in chamber music ensembles, and in a string orchestra formed specifically for the project (Villalvazo, 2021). Like many projects planned for 2020, further collaborations were stalled.

## VIRTUAL CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE PANDEMIC

In 2020, the authors, now both living in Mexico, shared a concern regarding how to conduct cultural diplomacy in a pandemic. Many arts organizations around the world released videos in which each artist separately recorded their role. As concertmaster of Mexico's National Symphony Orchestra, William participated in such a video (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2020). The Juilliard School's version of Bolero (2020) is a particularly noteworthy example. However, as soon as health authorities permit, arts organizations rooted in a particular city seek to continue to create art in person, their rosters

<sup>1</sup>For more information: [www.culturesinharmony.org](http://www.culturesinharmony.org). Cultures in Harmony has maintained 501(c)(3) status in the USA since December 16, 2008.

united on a single stage in front of their loyal audiences.

A few arts organizations realized the potential of this newly popular video genre to embody cultural diplomacy at its best. In Nico Muhly's *Throughline* (Barone, 2020), commissioned and performed by the San Francisco Symphony, that orchestra's music director Esa-Pekka Salonen appears to cause a harp to sound in California from the comfort of his home thousands of miles away in Finland, his gentle striking of rocks and trees coinciding with the harp notes (San Francisco Symphony, 2020). Famed sitar player, Anoushka Shankar (2000), released a multicultural collaboration, "Those Words," in which the presence of solitary musicians in their homes heightened the impact of the song's wistful nature, suggesting that we are each isolated only if we choose to be. The gold standard of the genre may be the World Economic Forum's (2021) video "See Me," which brought together renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the chamber orchestra of ANIM, and musicians from South Africa, Brazil, China, and more.

Cultures in Harmony chose to launch a platform that would eventually feature many of these kinds of videos: "Connecting Cultures through Counterpoint" (Cultures in Harmony, n.d.). In 2020, the platform paid musicians in Congo, Zimbabwe, India and Mexico to share aspects of their culture. But that did not allow us to encourage the kind of dialogue that cultural diplomacy can achieve at its best. So, in 2021, CiH launched #Connect4 videos that bring musicians from four different countries together to play the same piece of music.

For the first video, Pakistani sitar player Nafees Ahmad, director of the music department at

Karachi's National Academy of Performing Arts and frequent CiH collaborator since 2009, sent the founder of CiH one of his compositions called "Musica Senza Confini," or Music Without Borders. William arranged two violin parts for Fernanda Villalvazo (coauthor of this article) and Keamogetswe Magau, a violinist he met while serving as guest concertmaster of the KwaZulu Natal Philharmonic Orchestra in Durban, South Africa, in 2017. Percussionist Stephen Solook, a frequent CiH project participant, improvised a percussion part. (Cultures in Harmony, 2021a)

The video made a strong positive impact, receiving many comments on social media: one user on YouTube wrote, "It's beautiful to see how the music makes [this] possible...Very different countries and cultures playing together in spite of distance." The version on Facebook received over 20,000 views (Cultures in Harmony, 2021b).

As part of its virtual activities during the pandemic, Péepem Art Association initiated a virtual Christmas concert in 2020 that allowed people from around the world to experience a holiday musical event that could not easily be duplicated in person. Musicians from the USA, Mexico, Austria, Germany, Thailand, Greece, Bulgaria, Wales, and Sweden each played and explained to the virtual public a holiday-related musical piece from their culture. (Péepem Art, 2020)

However, no cultural diplomacy video can substitute for in-person projects.

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<sup>2</sup> It is incorporated as an association under Austrian law. For more information: <https://www.facebook.com/P%C3%A9epem-Art-195130021401739>

## **SOCIALLY DISTANCED CULTURAL DIPLOMACY—WHERE THE VIOLIN IS HAPPINESS, AND THE MOUNTAINS GO UP INSTEAD OF DOWN**

In 2021, the authors looked for a way to unite their separate organizations through a face-to-face project in which it would be possible to connect cultures through music, but without excessive risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19. They thought of going to the remote Sierra Tarahumara mountain range in northern Mexico, where the indigenous Rarámuri people live amidst spectacular scenery without many public services, stores, paved roads, transportation, or access to service or construction professionals, as a result of which Rarámuri must perform for themselves tasks such as potable water extraction, building construction, animal husbandry, farming, manufacture of clothing, and more. The violin plays an exceptionally important role in their culture, so much so that in some small communities, about one in ten people have some familiarity with playing the violin: Rarámuri ceremonies, from foot races to parties, often feature the violin. As it happens, the authors of this article were not the first classical musicians to travel there.

When the American pianist Romaine Wheeler graduated from the Vienna Conservatory of Music in 1972, his professors suggested that he document the music of Native Americans. An unusual series of circumstances (Rodríguez, 2016) led him to first visit the Sierra Tarahumara in 1980, when he started to visit annually. From 1992, he began to live there full time, dedicating all the proceeds from his international concert career to helping the Rarámuri with education, health, and food security.

With the support of the United States Consulate in Ciudad Juarez, the authors went to Chihuahua to give medicine and musical supplies to the

Rarámuri, supporting Romaine's decades-long mission (Cultures in Harmony, 2021c; U.S. Mission to Mexico, 2021). The vastness of the landscape and a lifestyle rooted in the outdoors certainly permitted the authors to maintain social distancing.

The authors went to the Sierra Tarahumara to help musicians preserve their culture and traditions, but they ended up being the ones who felt helped and welcomed. Visiting a place that remains almost pristine, connected to its traditional culture, and where the value of a person is measured by how much he or she contributes to others, reconnected the authors with our own deepest values. During the project Fernanda and William managed to get rid of their preconceived notions and strict classical training to meld their music and their souls with the purity of the landscape and the hearts of the people who inhabit it. In-depth conversations with many Rarámuri about topics ranging from music's role in society to the noteworthy affinity many have for long-distance running (Lieberman et al., 2020) expanded their own paradigms, positively impacting their professional lives as musicians in the megalopolis of Mexico City.

For their own part, they were able to offer many Rarámuri violinists instruments, cases, bows, strings, rosin, and other supplies they need to maintain the importance of the violin in their culture. Rarámuri communities live in the most remote parts of Chihuahua state, allowing them to preserve the essence of their culture. In most of these communities, all the food and materials that exist have been produced there or are transported on the backs of the people who live there (Cultures in Harmony, 2021c). It would be difficult for Rarámuri to buy items at a music store unless they hitch a ride or walk several hundred kilometers to the nearest city. There are some local violin makers, who can craft the instruments using wood,

but to get the materials to make items like strings is impossible for them. As their society works mostly on a barter basis, earning money inside the Sierra Tarahumara becomes very difficult. Apart from visitors paying them for some assistance or a few programs offered by the federal government, like

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Sembrando Vida (Secretaria de Bienestar, 2020), Rarámuri must go to a bigger town or city outside their mountain range in order to earn money. All of these factors motivated the intention of the authors to support their colleagues in the Sierra Tarahumara.



Figure 2. The authors with Rarámuri violinists Herculano and Porfirio Cubesare, Sierra Tarahumara, northern Mexico, April 2021.

Porfirio Cubesare, who helped the authors as a friend, guide, and implementation partner in their work there, told them about his concern regarding changes in the amount of rain the Sierra Tarahumara receives: global warming is affecting their crops and the way they produce food (Argomedeo, 2020; Guajardo, 2009), but he believes that these changes are because God wants the Rarámuri to better preserve their traditions and retain their fundamental values. The irony in these words stems from the Rarámuri culture's inherently austere and climate-friendly lifestyle.

Romayne Wheeler has incorporated himself into the Rarámuri lifestyle more thoroughly than any outsider probably could. Like the Rarámuri, he uses the traditional huarache instead of shoes. He wears traditional clothing and lives a simple life with few luxuries. He has adopted many aspects of their philosophy as his own, writing one of the key anthropological texts about their beliefs (Wheeler, 2000). He continues to write new books about them, books which have inspired many people around the world. One of the most important books is *Life through the eyes of a Tarahumara*: contains stories, reflections and poems that transport the reader to a simple life, full of beauty, commitment to nature, yet with many difficulties, a deep-rooted spirituality, and unique perspectives. In this book, which also contains expressive photographs, the author transports the reader to the heart of life, the rites and the customs of the Rarámuri people in an entertaining, simple and realistic way.

The race starts early in the morning and lasts all night because they want to run at least thirty laps around the circuit. The course is 150 kilometers. But this is not just a race; the men have to move a ball made of lightweight arbutus wood about the size of a baseball while running. They throw the ball in front of them with their feet, the ball may not be touched by anything other than a foot, or a

stick and runners may not finish the race without a ball...They run at the speed of a fast-trotting horse. They are often accompanied by friends to encourage them and not lose their bets. You must keep in mind that they maintain this rhythm day and night, up, down, through the bushes, forests, rivers and throwing a ball! It should not be assumed that at the end the runners are exhausted and that they arrive out of breath, only a few sweat and quicken their breathing. There are doctors who have proven that their pulse does not vary when they climbs two thousand meters from the ravine to the summit. One of my friends, Patrocinio López, once carried my luggage up a steep hill while playing a happy tune on the violin he made. Reaching the top, he pointed his finger towards a distant mountain range, saying that if I had not accompanied him, he would have already reached there (ibid, pp. 128–129).

However, advancing age and the pandemic compromise Romaine Wheeler’s continued ability to help the Rarámuri as he has since 1980: by leaving the Sierra Tarahumara in order to give fundraising concerts around the world. In order to best assist his work converting musical concerts into tangible assistance for the Rarámuri, the authors realized that it might be helpful for the fundraising concerts to come to him, rather than him going to the concerts. The authors formulated an idea that can be implemented even during a pandemic: the Festival of the Sierra Tarahumara (Cultures in Harmony, n.d.).

This event will connect festival guests and members of the Rarámuri community. It brings the public to the mountains, providing attendees with an unforgettable experience that is very difficult to replicate in any other context or place. Those attending the festival will have the opportunity to know impressive and pure landscapes, live with the indigenous community of Retosachi, take walks to

the neighboring communities guided by members of the community, experience a traditional Rarámuri party, and at the end of each day, listen to a concert of classical music with internationally renowned soloists while they enjoy the sun setting in the Batopilas canyon.

Likewise, festival guests will enjoy the opportunity to meet Romaine Wheeler—composer, pianist, writer and humanitarian, whose life is dedicated to music, reflection and altruism. They will be able to listen to his music and poetry full of wisdom, the result of years of introspection and contact with indigenous communities.

In 2021, the authors held the festival for a local and livestream audience, but in 2022, guests will have the opportunity to experience this for themselves. Even as the pandemic renders most in-person cultural diplomacy impossible, the unique cultural and geographical conditions in the Sierra Tarahumara facilitate mutually beneficial exchange.

### **AN UNSOUGHT EXCHANGE: THE EXODUS OF AFGHAN MUSICIANS**

After returning from Retosachi in April, a project Cultures in Harmony that never would have sought, came to its attention. Kabul fell under the control of the Taliban on August 15, for the first time in nearly twenty years (Zucchini, 2021). ANIM founder Dr. Sarmast, then in Australia for medical treatment, and William Harvey, then in Mexico City, were inundated with dozens of messages from Afghan musicians seeking to flee the Taliban, who banned music during their first time in power from 1996 to 2001. Dr. Sarmast focused on the evacuation of the ANIM community, which he eventually achieved, relocating hundreds of students, teachers, and their family members to Portugal (Reuters, 2021).

CiH focused on musicians who Dr. Sarmast

could not include in his plans. Currently, William manages a WhatsApp group responsible for 326 musicians. Cultures in Harmony has raised over \$30,000 to assist them. To date, CiH has assisted many Afghans with survival-related expenses such as food and fuel, urgently needed due to the Taliban's inability to manage an economy (Goldbaum, 2021). CiH helped two Afghan musicians get accepted to and assisted their travel to universities in the USA—Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and Nyack College. Another musician is now in Canada thanks in part to their efforts. In Mexico, CiH partners with Proyecto Habesha (n.d.), an organization with seven years of experience in resettling Syrian refugees in this country. Together, they will bring seven Afghan musicians to Mexico in late April 2022; those musicians will be on track to become Mexican citizens. They will spend one year in Aguascalientes learning Spanish before taking a one-year music course at the Universidad Panamericana in Mexico City.

The role that the anti-music principles of the Taliban played in inspiring the founding of Cultures in Harmony underscored the importance of assisting Afghan musicians in their hour of greatest need. A global network of contacts needed to be mobilized instantly. The pandemic imposed a perverse advantage: many people needed to help Afghans now had more time to do so. For the Afghan musicians, suddenly their membership in a global community of musicians became more salient than their identity as Afghans in a country whose new government now rejected the morality of music, a prohibition that for Afghan musicians transcends the merely professional and touches the core of their identity.

The first Afghan musician to arrive in the USA thanks to CiH posed at the airport with the cello teacher at New York's Nyack College who helped

her get accepted. Seldom have the connections facilitated by music appeared as poignant as in an image of two women rendered similar in appearance by winter weather, pandemic-imposed face masks, and the Afghan arriving without her guitar, since it would have been a risk for her to approach the airport in Kabul with it, given the likelihood that the Taliban would destroy the instrument, prevent her from leaving, and/or incarcerate her.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural diplomacy is more relevant than ever because the world is both more connected and more divided than ever before. On the one hand, a globalized economy, the internet, and social media connect us in ways almost impossible for our ancestors to imagine. On the other hand, the maintenance of vestiges of political and economic imperialism, plus terrorism motivated by economics, politics, or religion, have exacerbated all forms of hatred, whether based on religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The attacks of September 11, 2001, made it impossible for the citizens of the country with the world's largest economy and military—the United States of America—to continue to ignore these problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made these problems worse: suspicions caused by the virus' likely origin in China have deepened political divisions between the China and the rest of the world while increasing acts of hatred directed against people of Chinese background (or people perceived to be of Chinese background) in many countries. Even inside the same culture, barriers appear when we discuss our approach to the virus and in many parts of the world violent attacks to doctors and nurses were registered (Semple, 2020).

No single discipline can claim to solve these problems, but cultural diplomacy does attempt to alleviate them by affirming the connections that

reminds us all of our membership in one human family. Cultural diplomacy as practiced by both Cultures in Harmony and Péepem Art Association had to evolve due to the strictures imposed by the pandemic. Since cultural diplomacy normally depends on in-person interaction—indeed, it has previously been impossible to imagine cultural diplomacy without people in a room, exchanging ideas from each other’s cultures or appreciating the art another culture created—cultural diplomacy became more challenging than ever before at precisely the historical moment when we desperately need reminders of our common humanity.

Cultures in Harmony and Péepem Art Association worked together to create a virtual collaborative video that brought together musicians from Pakistan, South Africa, Mexico, and the United States to play the same piece of music. These organizations collaborated on an in-person project in the Sierra Tarahumara in northern Mexico, an isolated area where people live much of their lives outdoors, thereby obviating the need to constantly think about social distancing.

Cultures in Harmony rose to the challenge of helping Afghan musicians in spite of the pandemic, and here an obvious through-line can be drawn. The USA ignored the reactionary ideology of the Afghan mujahideen they empowered in the 1980s in order to weaken the Soviet Union. Many of those mujahideen would go on to found the Taliban, under whose totalitarian rule music was illegal. The USA continued to ignore them until the attacks of September 11, 2001, made that course of action impossible. For nearly twenty years, an American-backed order in Afghanistan enabled music to be legal, as it is in every other country in the world, but the USA ignored lessons from other nation-

building efforts throughout history and the Taliban reconquered the country, once again banning music, creating an exodus of Afghans (particularly including musicians) during a pandemic that also might have been avoided or mitigated had we paid greater attention to the interconnected nature of modern human society and its impact on our global natural environment.

What other consequences might result if we forget our common humanity? What wars, acts of terrorism, and pandemics can we avert if we remember it? No single tool can guide humanity on a wiser or more peaceful path, but at minimum, cultural diplomacy provides a small corrective. The American audiences who witnessed the US tour by the Afghan Youth Orchestra in February 2013 undoubtedly felt more convinced of the importance of US support of Afghanistan. A small project that Cultures in Harmony implemented in China in 2018 created a positive image of American culture in the minds of the dozens of people who

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experienced it, but massive cultural diplomacy by China in the USA before the pandemic might have reduced the incidents of tragic anti-Asian racism that increased since early 2020. That the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

<sup>3</sup>While the pandemic prevented Romaine Wheeler from giving as many concerts as he would like, some were able to proceed, including the one described here: <https://www.fundaciongrupomexico.org/DiaVoluntario/Paginas/ConCausa.aspx>

fell, that those tragic incidents of racism did happen, should not be taken as a failure of cultural diplomacy, but rather, as motivation to work harder.

Cultural diplomacy, which can be defined as building peace through understanding between peoples, is more challenging than ever at precisely the moment when it is more necessary than ever. Practitioners within and beyond academia will need to continue acts of cultural diplomacy in order to inspire all eight billion residents of this planet to see themselves in the other.



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