

WHY COUNTRIES USE UNIVERSITIES TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE GLOBAL POLITICS

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Abstract: *This article examines the evolving role of higher education as a strategic asset in contemporary international relations. The author analyzes the transition of educational diplomacy from a mere tool for cultural enrichment to a core component of "soft power," used to build long-term geopolitical alliances and secure economic competitive advantages. By comparing the strategies of traditional Western educational hubs with emerging regional centers, the study explores how student mobility influences the global distribution of power. Particular attention is paid to the challenges of digital transformation and the "securitization" of science in the context of rising global tensions.*

Keywords: *International Relations, Higher Education, Soft Power, Educational Diplomacy, Globalization, Academic Mobility, Multipolarity.*

INTRODUCTION

In the third decade of the 21st century, the architecture of the international system is undergoing a profound shift. The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world has redefined the nature of state competition. While traditional "hard power" (military and economic coercion) remains relevant, the battle for global influence is increasingly fought in the realm of ideas, innovation, and human capital. Higher education has emerged as a frontline instrument in this struggle. Historically viewed as a vehicle for personal development or universal scientific progress, it is now integrated into the national security and foreign policy frameworks of major powers. The "export of education" serves three primary functions in modern International Relations (IR):

1. **Elite Socialization:** By educating the future political and business leaders of foreign nations, a host country instills its values, language, and institutional norms, creating a long-term "pro-base" of influence.
2. **Economic Competitiveness:** Global student mobility is a multi-billion dollar industry that funds domestic research and offsets demographic declines in aging societies.
3. **Technological Sovereignty:** Attracting "the best and brightest" (human capital) is essential for maintaining leadership in AI, quantum computing, and green energy.

This article aims to investigate how educational strategies have become synchronized with geopolitical goals and what this means for students of International Relations who must navigate this "diplomacy of knowledge."

Methods. This study employs a multi-disciplinary approach to capture the complexity of educational diplomacy:

- **Systemic Analysis:** Viewing the global educational market as a subsystem of the broader international political economy.

- Comparative Case Studies: Analyzing the divergent models of internationalization, specifically the Western Liberal Model (focused on institutional autonomy and market fees) and the State-Driven Model (used by China and Russia as a direct tool of statecraft).
- Quantitative Data Synthesis: Examining longitudinal data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and OECD reports to track the shift in student flows from the West toward regional "knowledge hubs."
- Geopolitical Modeling: Assessing the impact of the "New Cold War" rhetoric on academic cooperation and visa policies

Results. The Shift Toward Multipolar Education

The data reveals a significant diversification of educational destinations. While the United States and the United Kingdom remain top destinations, their total market share has plateaued. Conversely, countries like China, Turkey, Russia, and the UAE have seen a 50–100% increase in international enrollment over the last decade.

Region/Model	Primary Strategy	Key Target Audience
Western (US/UK)	Commercialization & Innovation	Global elites, STEM researchers
European (Erasmus+)	Regional Integration	Intra-European youth
Asian (China/ASEAN)	Infrastructure & "Roads"	Developing nations, Global South

Education as a Strategic "Soft Power" Asset. The research identifies a correlation between educational scholarships and UN voting patterns. Developing nations whose elites were educated in a specific superpower's university system are statistically more likely to support that power's diplomatic initiatives. Education creates "path dependency" in bilateral relations that lasts for decades.

The Securitization of Knowledge. A critical result of the current geopolitical climate is the "securitization" of academic exchange. In 2024–2026, we see an increase in vetting processes for students in sensitive fields (aerospace, cybersecurity). This marks a retreat from the "global village" ideal toward "sovereign science."

Discussion. The findings suggest that the "Golden Age" of borderless academic mobility may be coming to an end, replaced by a more fragmented system.

The "Brain Drain" vs. "Brain Circulation" Debate: For decades, critics argued that international education facilitated a "brain drain" from the Global South to the North. However, in a multipolar world, we see "brain circulation." Students are returning to their home countries with foreign degrees to lead local development, often bringing back the political biases of their host nations.

The Role of IR Students: Students of International Relations must now view education as a "dual-use" sector. It is both a bridge for peace (Track II diplomacy) and a site of ideological competition. The rise of "digital campuses" further complicates this; if a student studies at Harvard or Tsinghua via a VR headset from their home in Brazil, does the "soft power" effect remain as strong without physical cultural immersion?

Conclusion. International education is no longer a peripheral concern of the Ministry of Education; it is a core pillar of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1. Regionalization: We expect the rise of regional educational blocs (e.g., the EAEU space, the BRICS+ university network) that will offer alternatives to Western standards.

2. Hybridization: Future diplomacy will rely on "science diplomacy" to solve global issues (climate change, pandemics) even when political leaders are at odds.
3. Advice for Students: To succeed in the modern world, students must cultivate "global intelligence"—the ability to operate across different educational and value systems rather than relying on a single Western-centric worldview.

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