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Branding a small state as an innovation business partner

Kirsten Mogensen^{1,2}

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Abstract

Approximately 50 small countries depend on international cooperation for their survival as sovereign nations. This case study contributes to the discussion of cosmopolitanism versus internationalism in public diplomacy and place branding. It argues that limited bilateral partnerships with universities and businesses based on government-to-government agreements and shared interest are a safer strategy for small countries seeking reputational security than outspoken support for cosmopolitan values. This strategy is a very useful form of place branding, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. The case examined is Innovation Centre Denmark, with offices in innovation hotspots in various countries. It organizes its activities as bilateral triple helixes, inspired by the work of Henry Etzkowitz and his colleagues. The center developed as part of a nation branding strategy launched by Denmark, a small Nordic country, following the so-called Muhammad crisis in 2005–2006. Then Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen described the controversy as Denmark’s worst international relations incident since WW2, as it damaged the country’s brand in some parts of the world. The article is multidisciplinary in nature, as it combines theories from international relations, business studies, and communication. The public diplomacy approach adopted is primarily represented by Nicholas Cull and his colleagues.

Keywords Public diplomacy · Triple helix · Government–private partnerships · Innovation Centre Denmark · Reputational security · Place branding strategy

Introduction

In August 2023, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) issued a resolution criticizing Denmark and Sweden for allowing the burning of copies of the Quran in their territories (OIC 2023). They reminded everyone about a resolution approved by the UN General Assembly the previous week on “Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in countering hate speech,” which deplores violence against holy books and makes reference to

international law (UN General Assembly 2019; UN 2023a, 2023b).

Many of the 57 countries behind the OIC resolution do not tolerate religious freedom for non-Muslims in their countries (USCIFR 2023), but the Danish and Swedish governments did not react with a discussion of religious freedom and human rights in these countries. Instead, they made it publicly clear that they felt threatened by the prospect of violent protests, Islamist terror, and trade boycotts, as experienced during previous conflicts with the Islamic world. Considering what they perceived as a national security threat, they quickly tried to find a solution that would satisfy the OIC, even if it meant limiting the freedom of their own citizens. In December 2023, the Danish Parliament adopted a new law—referred to as the “Quran law” in the news media—prohibiting the burning of holy books, such as the Quran, the Tora, and the Bible.

The international brand of democratic countries cannot be controlled by governments to the same extent as that of dictatorships because information about democratic countries comes from millions of voices and not exclusively from the government. Citizen diplomacy impacts national

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brands, and some citizens behave provocatively. As the recent crisis shows, national brands can be harmed in some parts of the world—in this case, Muslim countries—when citizens express themselves within national boundaries in ways that are not, for various reasons, tolerated by dictators in powerful foreign countries.

The hard power balance between the small Scandinavian countries and the 57 Islamic countries overwhelmingly favors the latter. The Scandinavian countries may be attractive to many, but soft power alone cannot win a violent struggle. There is also a need for smart power, that is, the combination of soft power and hard power (Nye 2008). The world's approximately 50 small countries must have the backing of more powerful countries or be compliant to dictators. They depend on international cooperation for their survival as sovereign nations, and to attract this support, they depend on public diplomacy.

To compensate for the lack of hard power, they need to build “reputational security” (Cull 2024). The idea is that if countries are relevant to the international community, they can attach themselves to more powerful nations, which will protect them. When considering the operation of reputational security during the COVID pandemic, Cull pointed to four key elements in a typical reputational security strategy: demonstrating success, pointing to other countries' failures, donating gifts to other countries, and building partnerships (Cull 2022a). The partnership strategy is explored below.

Denmark has experienced freedom-related conflicts with Islamic countries before, and one of the strategies applied since the “Muhammad crisis” in 2005–2006 is to build relationships with leading minds from universities, businesses, and government institutions in more powerful countries. This is based on the triple helix idea and is partly administered by Innovation Centre Denmark (ICD), which has offices in six countries plus the HQ in Denmark.

This article explains the historical context in which ICD appeared as a public diplomacy tool aimed at rebranding Denmark as an innovative and attractive partner for more powerful nations. This introduction is followed by analyses and discussions of the different perspectives from which the center functions as public diplomacy. Based on the Danish experience, it argues that bilateral professional partnerships can function as useful public diplomacy tools for small states seeking reputational security and international partnerships in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Concepts and theories

Cull (2009) defined public diplomacy as:

an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public.

Historically PD has taken the form of contact between one government and the people of another state. PD does not always seek its mass audience directly. Often it has cultivated individuals within the target audience who are themselves influential in the wider community.

State public diplomacy functions as an intermediate link between a home country and the rest of the world, and in 2023, diplomats had to be able to juggle the perspectives of nationalism, internationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Muslim countries adopt a cosmopolitan perspective and target a universal audience in their effort to win support for the idea that violence against copies of holy books is an international crime. However, Denmark promotes internationalism when it seeks partnerships with a few influential people in other countries. On other occasions, Denmark also promotes cosmopolitanism, but this is outside the scope of this article.

Nationalism stresses state sovereignty, while *cosmopolitanism* stresses the rights of humans on the planet, which means that the world has a responsibility to protect individuals even if it means intervention in sovereign countries (Van Hoof 2012). Brysk (2009) included Denmark in what she called “Global Good Samaritans,” which are countries that support ideas of human rights, democratization, civil society, and international law, among others, internationally. During the 2010s, Western cosmopolitan ethics encountered resistance from nationalist movements to the extent that Gilmore (2023) now writes about a “post-universalistic” cosmopolitan approach. Nationalists question the legitimacy of the norms and institutions promoted by cosmopolitans. Conversely, *internationalism* “does not challenge the nation-states' sovereignty” (Sapiro 2020) and is supported by some writers from the “periphery” as an alternative to globalism (Ganguly 2022). Furthermore, in the context of international relations theory, the English School suggests a middle ground where states work together toward a better world as “good international citizens” (Gilmore 2023).

In Hannerz's (1990) examination of various approaches to engaging with people from other parts of the world, he found that *cosmopolitans* want to “immerse themselves” in foreign cultures, while *transnationals* (e.g., knowledge workers who fly around the world to perform tasks in cooperation with other knowledge workers Fukuyama 2018) are often part of a work-related international culture and do not seek to immerse themselves in the territorial base of foreign cultures.

Small states have previously made themselves relevant through the use of a range of strategies. As Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) maintain, small states tend toward



“championing cosmopolitanism,” and they “follow the winds of economic liberalism.” They tend to demonstrate “flexibility, consensus-seeking and coalition-building,” preferably within institutions governed by the “rules of the game,” to shelter against aggressive behaviour from powerful states. Larger powers do not perceive them as threatening, which is sometimes an advantage in international fora (Cull 2016), and if large states do not cooperate, small states may have “surprising opportunities” in diplomatic contexts (Pedi and Wivel 2020).

In this article, ICD’s activities are analyzed from constructivist and cultural public diplomacy (PD) approaches. *Constructivists* claim that transnational networks are important “for spreading norms and ideas” and “building trust and consensus” (Grieco et al. 2019). *Cultural diplomacy* seeks to share a country’s “knowledge, science, research and development, thoughts and values” (Fernández 2021). The article seeks to answer the following research question: How does IDC contribute to Denmark’s reputational security? The empirical data used in the study are mostly public documents, websites, and news items, and the analysis is hermeneutic in nature.

Key arguments/findings

This section analyzes ICD’s activities from five perspectives:

- (1) The history: a diplomatic crisis,
- (2) IDC: organization and branding,
- (3) The triple helix,
- (4) International trust and indexes,
- (5) Public diplomacy.

Relevant theory will be presented in each section.

The history: a public diplomacy crisis

Following the Cold War, Denmark adopted an activist foreign policy approach aimed at creating a “global order in accordance with liberal values and principles” (Pedersen 2012, p. 337). Over the following decade, its policy developed into “international activism,” where it accepted the use of “hard power” when necessary (Pedersen 2012, p. 342). However, liberal ideology is not universally supported and the “activist strategy shifted after 2001, assuming a more bilateral character by emphasizing a strong commitment policy towards the United States in the so-called ‘War on Terror’” (Pedersen 2012, p. 332).

In September 2005, the Danish newspaper, *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*, printed 12 editorial cartoons, most of which depicted the founder of Islam. Danish imams protested, and in late 2005, some of them visited countries in the Middle

East to elicit outrage. This resulted in violent protests around the world (Hassner 2011) and boycotts of Danish products. The crises made it clear that while some people wanted universal press freedom, others wanted universal protections against blasphemy. For a small state, conflicts over the legitimacy of cosmopolitan rights were clearly dangerous, with then Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen declaring the controversy as Denmark’s worst international relations incident since WW2.

The government’s crisis response was a global marketing plan to improve the country’s international brand. At the time, Denmark was ranked 14th in Anholt-GFK’s Nation Brand Index (NBI) and had aspirations to rank 10th among OECD and emerging countries by 2015 (Regeringen 2007; Merksel and Rasmussen 2015; Frelle-Petersen et al. 2012; Bendtsen 2007; Erhvervsministeriet, Økonomi- og 2007; Peng 2006).

Before the government designed the branding strategy, it analyzed English and Spanish language media coverage, data behind the NBI, and interviews with foreigners. The result, unsurprisingly, was that people in other countries knew little about Denmark unless they had had personal contact. In general, world citizens base their impression about other countries on what little knowledge they have about a country or world region (Martin et al. 2023).

A basic idea in the branding strategy was to include as many actors as possible: private and public and Danish and foreign. The activities had to be trustworthy and intent on selling Denmark as a creative country, where it was good to invest, be educated, and visit as a tourist/conference participant (Regeringen 2007). The strategy embraced the three spheres of globalization: economic, political, and cultural (Naumescu and Petruț 2022).

Among the strategy’s more than 350 initiatives was the establishment of technology centers in some of the world’s innovation hotspots (Wolff and Blau 2008). The pioneers considered these centers “a new type of commercial mission” (Innovation Center Denmark 2014), an idea in alignment with European mentality in the 2000s (Nelson 1993; Edquist 1997; Mas-Verdú 2007). Entrepreneurship and globalization were buzzwords linked to the neoliberal thinking that transcended North America and Europe after the Cold War, especially inspired by the Chicago School of Economics. Therefore, the inclusion of innovation centers among Danish initiatives hardly required justification. However, innovation centers were usually limited to an area or nation. ICD introduced the bilateral approach, although it was not the first country to reach out to innovation ecosystems abroad.

Another prosperous small state, Switzerland, had at the time “scientific consulates” (now called Swissnex) in the United States and Singapore (Stoumann et al. 2020). In an evaluation of Swissnex, Stoumann et al. (2020, p. 9)



described the Swiss purpose as “focusing on tapping into the local ecosystems and connecting people from Switzerland with peers in their respective locations.” Swissnex currently has representatives in more than 20 offices around the globe (swissnex.org). The idea began to spread, and in 2010, German Centres for Research and Innovation (DWIH) opened an office in New York and had offices in five countries by 2024 (<https://www.dwih-netzwerk.de>).

ICD: organization and branding

The first of the innovation centers was launched in Silicon Valley in 2006, followed by Shanghai in 2007 and Munich in 2008. In 2013, centers were established in innovation hotspots in three BRICK countries (São Paulo, Seoul, and New Delhi/Bangalore) and in 2016 in Tel Aviv and 2019 in Boston. The center in São Paulo was closed in 2020 due to a lack of interest from expected stakeholders (Agerhus 2020). ICD is organized as a joint venture between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Science and Technology, and its key business users are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs/born globals). Activities are partly financed by the Danish Finance Act (approximately \$6.6 million in 2024). ICD also receives income from user fees and grants from private foundations (Stage et al. 2023), so the budget for each office depends on these sources of income. The total number of employees working with IDC is less than 60.

Branding strategies are used to sell ideas to potential stakeholders. For example, in 2014, in a magazine targeting Danish entrepreneurs, various IDC offices were each presented with their own slogans: Silicon Valley, “Where innovation goes to scale”; Munich, “Where innovation is engineered”; São Paulo, “Partner up with the future”; Seoul, “Creativity combined with a high technological level”; Shanghai, “From made in China to created with China”; and New Delhi/Bangalore, “Innovation is on the agenda.” Using text and visuals, the magazine posting can hardly be distinguished from an advertisement from a private global consulting firm (Andersen 2014).

While each of the centers have slightly different tasks and expertise (Table 1), they all currently work within the three areas: green transition, life sciences, and tech, uniting “government bodies, academia and business through the triple helix model” (see Model 2). The current (2024) slogan is “Turning knowledge into growth” (Innovation Centre Denmark 2024). Stage et al. (2023) called ICD offices “innovation intermediaries.” These offices build networks, provide information, and act as consultants, and the outcome is usually only measurable after many years. Network participants are carefully selected, a process that ICD calls “matchmaking the future” (<https://icdk.dk/2024>) (Fig. 2).

In 2008, *Research and Technology Management* published a two-page article about the Silicon Valley office.

Technology and research attaché Søren Nedergaard explained that, on one hand, ICD helped Danish companies contact valley startups, universities, and venture capitalists, and on the other hand, it helped build partnerships between universities in California and Denmark. Nedergaard claimed that Denmark had a high ranking in the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) and the Network Readiness Index, that it had outstanding expertise in life science, wireless technologies, renewable energy, and design, and that it cooperated closely with other Nordic countries (Wolff and Blau 2008). The article is an example of the kind of press coverage that Denmark had hoped to receive.

In 2014, the publicity strategy included a visit by Danish Crown Prince Frederik to an ICD conference at Stanford University (Innovation Center Denmark 2014). A conference panelist “agreed on the need to be ‘in it’—putting a stake in the ground in the Valley, being in the same time zone, and even having a 415 [San Francisco] or 650 area code.” The Californian area code 650 covers San Mateo, Redwood City, Mountain View, South San Francisco, and Palo Alto—home to many of the world’s largest tech companies, venture capitalists, and Stanford University. Settling here implies immersing oneself in the transnational culture of knowledge workers to learn skills that can be used in transnational organizations around the world and create networks that can provide access to international influence.

Triple helix

The basic idea behind Etzkowitz’s and Leydesdorff’s triple helix (see fig. 1) is that cooperation among public government, industry, and science can contribute to innovation and economic prosperity, as in the case, for example, of Silicon Valley (Piqué et al. 2020) cooperation between the elite universities Stanford and Berkeley and successful tech companies, such as Google, eBay, Hewlett Packard, Intel, LinkedIn, and Apple. The three “helixes” cooperate and develop hybrid organizations, and in the process, they ideally develop shared norms around legitimacy and mutual trust. ICD has created its own model based on Etzkowitz’s and Leydesdorff’s (see fig. 2).

While the triple helix was originally thought of in a limited area context, ICD has applied the idea to bilateral cooperation. At its foundation are agreements between governments, placing the triple helixes within the legal and normative framework of modern state diplomacy. This is important because a government-to-government framework provides more opportunities, as well as limitations, compared to private business partnerships (Mogensen 2019). Furthermore, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 called for multinational multistakeholder engagement in solving the world’s problems (Oliveira-Duarte et al. 2021). The following examples



Fig. 1 Models of university - industry - government relations copied from Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000, p. 111). The first model is referred to as etatistic, the second as “laissez-faire”, and the third as “The Triple Helix Model of University–Industry–Government Relations”. A modified version of the laissez-faire model is used by Innovation Centre Denmark on its websites

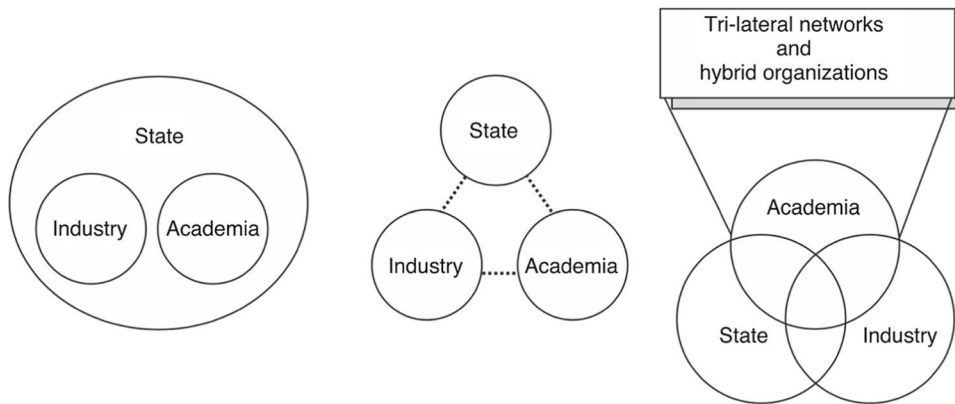


Table 1 Information about the IDC offices abroad according to the offices’ websites February 2024

ICD office location	Employees	Location	Examples of expertise
Silicon Valley	15	Consulate General, Palo Alto, CA, USA	Digital Technologies, Green Transition, Research and Education, HealthTech, Entrepreneurship
Boston	7	Consulate General, Boston, MA, USA	Life Sciences, Hospital Innovation, Bioconvergence and Bio-Solutions, Green Transition
Shanghai	7	Shanghai International Trade Centre, People's Republic of China	Life Sciences and Healthcare, Digitalization and Entrepreneurship, Greentech and Cleantech, Sustainable Transition, Higher Education
Munich	5	Consulate General Prinz-Ludwig-Palace, München, Germany	Tech, Green Transition, Industry 4.0, University–Industry Partnerships
Delhi/Bangalore	6	Consulate General, Indiranagar, Bangalore, India	DeepTech and AI, HealthTech, CleanTech, Energy, Robotics
Tel Aviv	7	Embassy of Denmark, Museum Tower, Tel Aviv, Israel	Life Sciences, GreenTech and FoodTech, Cyber Security and Quantum Technologies
Seoul	8	Embassy of Denmark, Seoul, South Korea	Tech and Digitalization, Circular Economy, Water and Environment, Power-2-X, Reinventing Cities, Life Sciences and Health Care

The number of staff is a count of those being presented as part of the team. The number of staff will change over time, but the numbers indicate the size of ICD

illustrate a practice where Danish regional and national triple helixes create a foundation for bilateral triple helixes.

Example 1: Israel

Denmark has had a cooperation agreement with Israel since 2007, with a focus on research and development in the private sector. Denmark wants to learn from Israel how to transform academic ideas into successful businesses and how to attract more foreign investment (ICDK 2022). One area of special interest is life science (Thomsen 2022), and in 2023, members of the Danish life science cluster visited Israel to discuss possible solutions to problems in the healthcare system. ICD posted the following on LinkedIn:

After 15 meetings with a variety of Israeli stakeholders [they] are returning home with 8 projects of collaboration with Israel. These are mainly focused on

developing new technologies and solutions, new ways of working with data in prevention and new ways of designing the healthcare system; all with the purpose of leading the way to a sustainable future for healthcare together with Israeli partners. (Innovation Centre Denmark 2023c)

Among the national triple helixes in this area is the Danish life science cluster, which “builds bridges” between companies, academic institutions, the healthcare system, and municipalities.

Example 2: USA

ICD in Silicon Valley and Boston prepared a 5-year (2021–2026) bilateral government agreement with the US Department of Energy, with a focus on power-to-X/hydrogen, carbon capture, utilization and storage (CCUS),



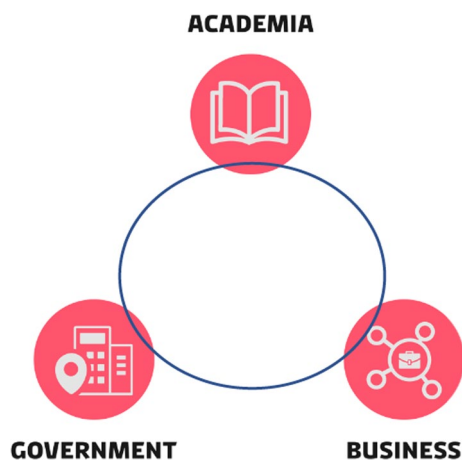


Fig. 2 Modified version of Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff’s laissez-faire model (2000). This figure is shown on Innovation Centre Denmark’s website <https://icdk.dk/what-we-offer> (Innovation Centre Denmark 2024). On the ICD website, lines are moving between the stakeholders in a circle. IDC refers to it as triple helix

wind energy and energy systems (Uddannelses- og Forskningsstyrelsen 2022). Events have included the Virtual Carbon Removal Summit 2021 and a triple helix based CCUS delegation visit to California in 2022, with visits to actors such as Google, Stanford University, the Lawrence Livermore National Lab, and the State of California, where policy workshops were organized in collaboration with the California Energy Commission and California Natural Resources Agency.

In 2023, the Danish Energy Agency and the California Energy Commission signed an “agreement providing the framework for a continued bilateral cooperation within the green agenda,” with both entities aiming to “reach carbon neutrality already by 2045” (Innovation Centre Denmark 2023a). Furthermore, the Digital Energy Hub connects Danish actors, including ICD, four universities, and more than 1000 actors in the fields of energy tech, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), data science and high-performance computing, and cyber security (Innovation Centre Denmark 2022).

International trust and indexes

The services provided by ICD have been widely evaluated (Oxford Research 2015; Randrup 2018; Mehta et al. 2023; Kollerup 2020; Stage et al. 2023); however, the published reports reveal little about the organization’s impact on Denmark’s image abroad. As the branding campaign did not change Denmark’s NBI rank (MedietMarkedsføring 2011; Frelle-Petersen et al. 2012), it was abandoned as a measure of success in 2013 (Merkelsen and Rasmussen 2015). In fact, Denmark was not among the 60 countries ranked in

2022 (Anholt 2022). Instead of the NBI, a more traditional evaluation approach was introduced, inspired by Svenska Institutet and the British Council. It included, for example, content analysis of foreign media coverage, the number of foreign visitors, and meetings with foreign stakeholders (Erhvervs- og Vækstministeriet 2012, p. 11).

Anholt also publishes the Good Country Index, which measures each country’s impact beyond its borders (<https://www.goodcountry.org/>, 2023), where Denmark is ranked second after Sweden. This index rates countries based on their contribution to the world, relative to their gross national product (GNP). The fields of interest are science and technology, culture, international peace and security, world order, the planet and climate, prosperity and equality, and health and well-being. In terms of data, the index uses 35 indicators, such as statistical information about exports, the number of science articles, and the level of press freedom.

While the sources used for such indexes vary, they are competitive. Only one country can achieve the top spot, and some countries will end up at the bottom. The indexes may be useful for some purposes, but there are factors that countries cannot change, for example, in relation to tourism, and for international cooperation in general, rankings may not be the most appropriate metric.

An alternative approach is to look at foreign stakeholders’ trust in the country’s people and government. Professional trust is based partly on how stakeholders perceive the ability, benevolence, and integrity of potential business partners (Mayer et al. 1995). When people experience that they can generally trust others, they are more open to international cooperation. A 2020 PEW Research Center survey (Connaughton and Moncus 2020) made the following observation:

In 11 of the 14 countries surveyed, those who say most people can be trusted are significantly more likely to believe their country should take the interests of other nations into account when dealing with major international issues, even if it means making compromises with them, as opposed to following its own interests.

The survey also showed that 86% of Danes believed that “most people can generally be trusted.” The corresponding figure for the United States was 58%, Germany 59%, and South Korea 57%, indicating the readiness to engage in bilateral partnerships (Connaughton 2020).

In the best of worlds, all our neighbors are highly trustworthy. Countries do not need to compete for the title of the most trustworthy country—all countries can get top marks. The benefit of being trustworthy include, for example, business opportunities (British Council 2012) and reputational security (Cull 2022a).

In an evaluation of the Danish branding campaign, Frelle-Petersen et al. (2012) argued that trust could be improved



through mutual relations between relevant stakeholders. Recently, some public diplomacy researchers considered the strength of networks an alternative to indexes because the depth of networks is relevant for trust (Roberts 2023).

Research has shown that media and opinion leaders have influence in the area of international trust. Referring to Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), Scott-Smith (2020) maintained that:

Receiving information from a member of one's peer group or a respected figure would have a greater impact than simply hearing or reading the same information directly from the media outlet. Even if the theory has been critiqued in the era of social media, it is still fair to say that humans chose who to trust.

Through the branding campaign, the Danish government chose to target specific influential groups, such as foreign governments, media, businesspeople, and elite scholars. Brewer and his colleagues (Brewer 2004; Brewer et al. 2004, 2005) defined the concept of international trust, which Mogensen (2015) used in an analysis of four international public diplomacy cases and their effect on public trust in target countries, including public diplomacy activities organized by the US embassy in Turkey (McKay 2012). According to Mogensen (2015):

In postmaterial societies many people want to link with foreigners who share their interests. Such transnational bonding can contribute to international trust because when participants are working together, creating, and finding solutions, they learn when to trust and not [...] To be successful, projects must be designed with the audiences' needs in mind (McKay 2012), and based on genuine mutual interests among actors—beyond feeling-good related charity and political advocacy. Such interests can include development of a market for export of goods, educational opportunities, and other forms of exchange.

The bilateral partnerships organized through IDC can be conceived as public diplomacy activities aimed at building trust. As with the public diplomacy activities in Turkey, they engage participants based on the notion of “genuine mutual interests among actors.”

Public diplomacy

Cull (2009) identified five key components of traditional public diplomacy: (1) listening; (2) advocacy; (3) cultural diplomacy; (4) exchange; and (5) international broadcasting and added, (6) psychological warfare as a parallel activity. The first four of these components are included in ICD practices. Cull also mentioned seven new public diplomacy practices, all of which are relevant for ICD: increased number of non-governmental actors, new

technology, “blurred” lines between national and international spheres, marketing, branding and network concepts, “people-to-people contact for mutual enlightenment, with the international actor playing the role of facilitator,” and relationship building, for example, “between two audiences, foreign to each other, whose communication the actor wishes to facilitate” (Cull 2009, p. 13). More recently, Cull (2022a, 2022b, 2024) (re-)introduced the concept of “reputational security” as an important goal for public diplomacy in a “dangerous age.”

While space constraints prevent a thorough analysis of how ICD has contributed to Danish public diplomacy, I will exemplify this through three of Cull's components: listening, exchange, and reputational security.

Listening

ICD staff meet with businesspeople, government officials, and scholars as part of their work and interact with ordinary citizens in their daily lives. They read newspapers and watch television; their children attend schools. Like any foreign mission, they regularly send reports to the main office back home in Copenhagen. These reports are considered internal documents, which means that they are not available for public consumption. However, each of the centers also publish their reports and news stories on their websites. Skimming them suggests that ICD's permanent presence provides Denmark with an invaluable insight into not only cutting-edge knowledge but also to what people in these countries experience as important and how they frame challenges.

Many of the news items are written in Danish and are clearly targeted at a Danish audience. This is in line with scholars increasingly pointing to the importance of engaging ordinary people in informed discussions on global affairs that influence their lives (Gilmore 2023). According to Kim and Melissen (2022):

The “mood of the country” has always influenced foreign policy capacity and international state behaviour, but society across the world has become more dynamic, is expressing more pronounced opinions on foreign policy-related matters affecting the domestic sphere, and people are claiming greater agency.

Writing in a language that is understood by less than 10 million people, rather than a more cosmopolitan language such as English, reflects the diversity of internationalism (Sapiro 2020). However, overall, the IDC website is in English in line with the purpose of reaching knowledge workers, e.g. IDC (2024) writes on its website: “We strive to form the bonds that create lasting change so that the best minds can shape the world of tomorrow.”



Exchanges, engagement, and cooperation

Exchange programs contribute to internationalization (Romani-Dias et al. 2022), and the impact on peace, trade, and innovation was recognized by powerful people early in human history. Scott-Smith (2020) noted that “exchanges are (ideally) the most two-way form of public diplomacy, opening up spaces for dialogue and the interchange of alternative viewpoints.” He added that preferable exchange provides participants with a “sense of empowerment and self-discovery.”

IDC administers programs aimed at university scholars and businesspeople. An example of academic exchange is the Lundbeck Foundation, which sponsored five Danish medical students to study for 1 year at University of California San Francisco and Stanford University School of Medicine. A recent survey showed that the 24 students (aged 24–35) who completed the program later published more first-author articles, engaged in binational collaboration, and participated in more international conferences than their peers back in Denmark. They also absorbed tacit knowledge such as “building a community of like-minded peers” (Mehta et al. 2023, p. 6).

An example of a business-related exchange program is the International Bioinnovation Scholarship Program, sponsored by the Novo Nordisk Foundation. It connects “talented graduate students from Danish universities with bioinnovation start-ups in Silicon Valley” for a 5-month research project. Eighteen of the 21 alumni agreed that “the program brought them in touch with people who could be useful if they seek to start their own business or innovation project” (Innovation Centre Denmark 2023b).

Over time, interaction enables people to get to know each other and may lead to friendships, though it often does not. In this regard, Krishnan et al. (2021) discussed the concepts *direct exchange* (negotiable) and *generalized exchange* (not explicitly negotiated). Experience shows that different norms can create problems with generalized exchange, so it is preferable with explicit rules-of-the-game, which also resulted in Danish guidelines for international research collaboration (Udvalg om retningslinjer for internationalt forskning- og Innovationssamarbejde 2022). Professional guidelines allow people to work productively together for years, even if they have very different values in private life. Transnational work culture, therefore, protects against the emotional disappointment that participants in other exchange programs can experience.

It is common knowledge that innovation is nurtured by tacit knowledge (Nonaka 1994) and that tacit knowledge does not depend on national or regional borders. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the world has seemed open to knowledge workers, and at the start of the century, it was expected that this positive outlook on collaboration and the

international transfer of knowledge would increase in the coming decades (e.g. Christensen 2000). However, COVID-19 and the war in Europe have since limited international travel (Mogensen 2022), and business managers now talk about de-globalization (Manfredi-Sánchez 2022).

Reputational security

The reputational security perspective has a national branding dimension; however, in a dangerous age, the tools differ somewhat from the optimistic branding perspective in the 2000s. Self-praise is still part of the package, but it is now supplemented with tools proposed by realist international relations theorists: critiquing opponents and “engaging others through gifts and a strategy of multilateral cooperation” (Cull 2022a).

The IDC spirit is that of an entrepreneur setting out to help the world find solutions to serious environmental and health problems in cooperation with other entrepreneurs, researchers, and government officials in innovation hotspots around the world. The implied message is that Denmark is a trustworthy, responsible partner in world affairs, and contributes knowledge and leadership, but expects to receive recognition and cooperation in return.

GCI indicates that small countries such as Denmark and Sweden contribute more to the world than they receive, which, theoretically, would make them valuable to the world community. However, the index is relative, as it takes GNP into consideration; therefore, looking at the big picture, the populations of China, India, and Brazil would hardly notice if small countries with a total population of less than 20 million people disappeared.

ICD’s innovation centers contribute to Danish reputational security though personal engagement and cooperation with influential foreign businesspeople, scholars, and politicians, with the implicit expectation that Danish engagement will pay off in form of help when needed.

Conclusion

While ICD is focused on innovation, in the process, they have tended to spread tacit knowledge about Danes globally and are part and parcel of the country’s government-sponsored public diplomacy. By placing ICD in various locations abroad and engaging with influential local actors in these locations, Denmark signals an interest in listening to and learning from innovative minds with different worldviews.

It is worth noting, though, that there are no centers in Muslim countries. Denmark has other forms of cooperation with these countries, for example, the Danish–Arab Partnership Programme in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which supports human rights and employment for



young people in the MENA region. However, these countries are not considered innovation hotspots. ICD has also no office in Russia despite its innovative capacity.

In 2024, Russia is perceived as a potential threat to Danish sovereignty, but a Russian senator met with the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to discuss “ways to enhance cooperation between the Islamic world and the Russian Federation in various fields, including politics, economics, social issues, culture, and science and technology” (OIC 2024) which is another example of countries building partnerships in a dangerous world.

The innovation context is a safer place to promote democratic values than the sensitive religious context of press freedom. In the context of long-term innovation networks, the actors involved demonstrate that an open and critical discussion of ideas can lead to better solutions. True cooperation requires an ability to compromise, be open to exchange of ideas, and accept criticism. It is public diplomacy communicated tacitly, which may be more convincing than explicit outcry, especially in times of psychological warfare and misinformation on the Internet. Through the innovation networks, democratic values are shown to work in practice and not just claimed to be productive, but cooperation requires mutual trust.

It is unknown whether foreign publics notice the underlying values inherent in ICD’s work. However, if foreign business and research partners, friends, and neighbors in the communities where Danes settle and the institutions where they engage are left with positive impressions, then they will share these impressions with their networks, and ideally, the positive image will spread. If the impressions are negative, a negative image will also spread. To many, word of mouth from people who have engaged with Danes directly have a stronger impact on their opinion than media campaigns. Therefore, Danes settling in a foreign country for a limited time are not only contributing to innovation but are, on a tacit level, contributing to the image of Danes.

Since the centers are partly sponsored by the foreign ministry, they represent Denmark’s foreign policy interests in the host countries. Some of them are located at diplomatic premises such as embassies and consulates. As such, they are interfaces between “the state as a notionally bounded community and the ‘outside’ of world politics” (Gilmore 2023). When ICD succeeds as a facilitator, connecting multiple stakeholders in technology, life sciences, and green transition, they demonstrate that Denmark can provide leadership in solving issues of shared global concern. This has an impact on the country’s international reputation, which, if perceived as valuable, contributes to national security (Cull 2022b).

As mentioned in the introduction, Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) argued that small states tend toward “championing cosmopolitanism.” In the 2010s, the world witnessed a rise

in populist nationalism, a rise that Gilmore (2023, p. 80) argued exposed a “disconnection” between the supporters of cosmopolitanism and “the everyday lives of many” people. This disconnection “poses a particular challenge to the nascent cosmopolitan-mindedness of solidarism.”

While cosmopolitanism in its most extreme form promotes a shared morality in a shared world, position “individuals beyond state borders as an important ethical reference point” (Gilmore 2023, p. 82), internationalism is the idea that we can build a better world if nations and their people cooperate across national and cultural barriers (Smith 2019). One of the criticisms of cosmopolitanism has been the legitimacy of who decides the supposed shared norms, for example, who decides whether freedom of speech is good when parts of the world’s populations find it objectionable?

As the activities of the various centers are based on government-to-government agreements, as the centers cooperate with host countries’ people in a professional manner related to specific technical and life science challenges, and as they do not explicitly aim to change host countries’ diverse religious and cultural norms, their practices promote internationalism. In doing so, they have so far avoided the provocation of outrage, such as that experienced after the publication of the Muhammad cartoons and burning of holy books.

Practical implications

For a small country with only 6 million people and hardly any natural resources, international cooperation is fundamental for Denmark’s ability to prosper, and Danes are not alone. According to the World Bank, there are approximately 50 small countries, which generally depend on international cooperation for their survival as sovereign nations.

This case study contributes to the discussion of cosmopolitanism and internationalism in relation to small state public diplomacy. Being too forceful in promoting a cosmopolitan agenda can be dangerous for a small country because it creates hostility in countries with alternative norms, as illustrated by the conflict in 2006 and 2023. Seeking bilateral partnerships with universities and businesses based on government-to-government agreements and limited to projects of shared interest exemplifies a much safer strategy for small countries seeking reputational security.

ICD uses tested diplomatic tools such as government-to-government agreements, listening, and exchange within an innovation framework, which may make them more resilient than if they were constructed to fit the still-contested neoliberal nation branding ideology of the 1990s.

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Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Mogensen has also for years been seconded by the Danish Foreign Ministry to election observation missions organised by OSCE, EU and the Carter Center. As such, she has observed in many countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America.

