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“Linsanity,” Social Media and US-Asia Relations

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Elina Noor, Assistant Director, Foreign Policy and Security Studies at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, explains that “The reality is that below the stratosphere of grand strategy, the microcosms of Asia and America are increasingly being interwoven through the interactions of sports, culture, language, and music.”

Jeremy Lin, the New York Knicks’ former benchwarmer and now worldwide basketball sensation, is the new Cinderella Man or “Linderella” of basketball, and maybe even more. As the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) first American-born player of Chinese-Taiwanese descent, Lin has notched impressive game statistics, sparked new “Lin-go” around his name, and enraptured fans from Queens to the Bay Area, Zhejiang to Taipei, and Jakarta to Kuala Lumpur.

This phenomenon that is “Linsanity” has struck at an interesting time, amidst whispers of a United States in decline and an Asia in ascent. While it is absurd to suggest that one successful Asian-American athlete holds the key to managing international relations, there are certainly lessons to draw from the parable of Jeremy Lin.

Lesson One: Icons Impact International Relations. Few political leaders can fire the mass consciousness, imagination, and emotions of millions across the Asia-Pacific as effectively as Lin did in just under ten games and a few weeks as he rose to fame. Since then his name has been as hotly debated in sports commentaries as in political punditry. The fact that Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping was visiting the United States just as Lin’s stardom took off made for a creative—if not slightly awkward—juxtaposition of US-China and China-Taiwan cross-strait relations in the media.

If social media is anything to go by, Lin already has a bigger following abroad than he does in the United States. After just five games, Lin’s fan base on China’s most popular microblogging network, Sina Weibo, neared the one million mark compared to just 250,000 Twitter followers and 500,000 fans on Facebook. Asian TV stations scrambled to add Knicks’ games to their schedule and not since Yao Ming has there been such a frenzy for the NBA throughout Asia. From one end of the Pacific to the other, Asians with even a slight affinity for basketball, sports, or simply a feel-good story are swelling with pride at Lin’s new-found, but long deserved, success.

Lin’s popularity parallels that of Taiwan-based American singer-songwriter, Wang Leehom. Fusing Western music with overlays of classical Chinese sounds, Wang’s music is a unique style that blends the sounds of the East and the West. Public approval has been overwhelming. Wang has more than 11 million Chinese followers on Weibo alone, and a larger “Hom-base” of fans spread across China and Southeast Asia than in the United States. How many political leaders can claim that sort of following in their home country, let alone across continents?

The Lin/Wang effect has been so significant that it deserves its own term: “Icon Diplomacy.”



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Lesson Two: Sport and Entertainment Make for Great Diplomacy. Like Lin, sports and the arts have been undervalued and overlooked as tools of diplomatic outreach and soft power. One good example is the “Ping-Pong diplomacy” in US-China rapprochement in the 1970s. Another more recent non-political example is the New York Philharmonic Orchestra’s visit to North Korea in 2008 that was well received in Pyongyang. For too long such people-to-people interactions have been viewed as intangible, lifestyle pursuits rather than serious foreign policy instruments. Sport is play, music is entertainment, and movies are recreation. The reality is that below the stratosphere of grand strategy, the microcosms of Asia and America are increasingly being interwoven through the interactions of sports, culture, language, and music.

The frenzy that Lin ignited may be temporary but there is long-term capital to be gained by institutionalizing that zeal through international sport camps, clinics, and exchanges. Peace dividends are gained not just through military cuts. They are also gained through US Division I or II collegiate players spending a summer in Southeast Asia coaching aspiring players, and through industry placements in dance companies, recording labels, production companies, or emerging sporting leagues. Unbound by the whims and dregs of politics, it is sports and the creative arts which will catalyze dynamic ways for people to connect and relations to endure.

Lesson Three: Technology Changes the (Diplomatic) Game. As an elite Asian-American athlete, Lin’s narrative parallels those of tennis star Michael Chang and figure ice-skater Michelle Kwan in the 1990s. These stories shatter stereotypes and inspire ambition. What differentiates the current Lin narrative though is the sheer scale and reach it has had through technology and new social media. Chang and Kwan inspired through television and newspapers. Lin impacts virally through wire reports, Twitter feeds, Facebook updates, YouTube posts, and Weibo microblogging. The result is that Linsanity is (L)instant.

This combination of extraordinarily gifted individuals combined with new technologies makes for compelling icon diplomacy. A single YouTube video of Lin or Wang brings together Asia, America, and a shared passion of both populations in a way that no jet travel ever can. One gets a sense of the emotion and enthusiasm just by reading the video’s comments section.

The promise of technology is that any individual has the potential to affect a wide audience of people in much the same way. It is how YouTube sensations are born and cult followings explode internationally. Occasionally, when collaborations happen between the stars of social media and “traditional” entertainment media, the multiplier effect of icon/citizen diplomacy is reinforced and amplified.

The paradox of technology shrinking the world is that the world effectively becomes a much larger place because of the virtual dissolution of borders on the Internet. On one level it renders illusory the dichotomy of Asia and America. It also cautions against a simplistic reading of the two as strictly separate, competing, and mutually exclusive entities. The cross-fertilization of ideas, languages, and values through new media only underscores this.

As Asia rises and America pivots, other tectonic plates will have to adjust. But amidst the Linsanity is the reminder that despite the political jostling and power play between and among nations, there are opportunities for all to ride the same crest. People-to-people initiatives powered by drivers like sports or cultural diplomacy have the potential to cultivate and cement ties that stand above political change and uncertainty. Like basketball, these initiatives prompt different diplomatic plays when traditional political diplomacy does not seem to be working. Unlike basketball, international relations need not be a zero-sum game even when the game changes.