

Theoretical Implication: Neorealism vs. Neoliberal Institutionalism in Educational Diplomacy

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: Oct 08, 2025 Revised: June 20, 2026 Accepted: June, 28, 2026	The article explores educational diplomacy as an evolving instrument of international relations, analysed through Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism. It argues that scholarships, exchanges, and research collaborations serve as tools of soft power, shaping perceptions and fostering cooperation beyond military and economic means. Neorealism views these initiatives as strategic instruments for national interests and relative gains, while Neoliberal Institutionalism emphasizes their potential to create absolute gains, trust, and cooperation. Drawing on examples such as the U.S. Fulbright Program, China's Confucius Institutes, and Pakistan's scholarship initiatives, the study highlights how states employ education competitively and cooperatively. Special focus is given to South Asia, where India-Pakistan rivalry limits academic cooperation but also makes educational diplomacy valuable as a confidence-building measure. The article concludes that educational diplomacy is dual in nature, both a tool of power politics and a pathway for dialogue, interdependence, and regional stability.
Keywords <i>Neorealism,</i> <i>Neoliberal institutionalism,</i> <i>Regional security,</i> <i>Domestic politics,</i> <i>International diplomacy</i>	

1. Introduction

The 21st century has seen education emerge as a potent instrument of diplomacy, to the extent that it has long remained a knowledge transfer mechanism. States are no longer restricted to the use of military or economic tools to project their power; instead, they use their educational diplomacy by using scholarships, exchange of academics, collaboration on research projects, and cultural events to enhance their soft power and influence the way the world views them and establish long-term relationships. This tendency emphasizes the fact that knowledge and ideas, and institutions have become as important factors in international politics as arms or trade treaties. Educational diplomacy is a point of contact between the foreign policy and international relations of such giants as the United States, China, and Russia. Education is a tool of competition, collaboration, be it in the form of student exchange programs, Confucius institutions, or Fulbright scholarships to third-world nations, including Pakistan. Educational diplomacy gives the possibility of increasing the world's visibility, the attraction of talent, and mutual understanding with partner states. The increased relevance of this practice necessitates the need to examine the relevance using theoretical frameworks, which explain the way the state behaves in international relations. It is useful to review the implications of educational diplomacy in terms of the debate between Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism. Neorealism is a structural realism developed by Kenneth Waltz that perceives the international system as a state of anarchy and states as rational agents interested in power and security. In such a context, educational diplomacy is considered an instrument of national interest, relative gains, and geopolitical profit (Waltz, 1979). Conversely, when it comes to neoliberal institutionalism, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, there are international institutions, interdependence, and cooperation.

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Educational diplomacy leads to trust building, long-term partnerships, and international governance via academic networks.

This article will endeavour to describe the theoretical implications of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism in the practice of educational diplomacy by comparing the assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of these two highly dominating theories. It also highlights the various ways states utilize educational initiatives as sources of power and as pathways for cooperation. It also focuses on the applicability of these theories to modern educational diplomacy, with specific emphasis on the global examples as well as the changing role of Pakistan in academic interaction in doing so. The article plays a role in closing the gap between the international relations theory and the factual practice of foreign policy due to education (Knight, 2015).

2. Conceptualizing Educational Diplomacy

Educational diplomacy is the application of education as a foreign policy tool and instrument of international relations. It includes how states and institutions, and international organizations use education to build perceptions, develop understanding with one another, project influence, and encourage cross-border cooperation. One concept that has spread widely due to Joseph Nye and that underlines the capacity of states to exert pressure or power on other states without force. (Nye, 2004).

Educational diplomacy involves persuasion, cooperation, and long-range relationship building, unlike the traditional approach of diplomacy that employs the political or military bargaining approach. Practically, educational diplomacy has a wide range of activities, state-sponsored scholarship programs for foreign students, bilateral and multilateral academic contracts, the organization of foreign cultural and language centres, and transnational joint research. An example is how the United States employs the Fulbright Program in enhancing its international image. China uses Confucius Institutes as one of its wider global outreach policies. These activities provide an example of how education can become a clandestine tool of influencing the mass mind, networks of influence, and selling national values overseas. Educational diplomacy is also important for generating people-to-people contact, cultural barriers, as well as the improvement of intercultural dialogue. Elite policymaking is not the only aspect of academic linkages, as it involves individuals, communities, and institutions that form cross-border ties as students come back home after studying in foreign countries. They are not only technologically informed but also contain cultural experiences and personal contacts that can affect bilateral relations. Thus, Educational diplomacy initiates long-term investments in goodwill, which could even survive through political or economic periods. It can be argued that educational diplomacy is a two-way instrument; it helps Pakistan to enhance the quality of education within the country but also provides a stronger international presence. The use of scholarships to accept Afghan students in Pakistan, the work done by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and even the engagement in agencies such as UNESCO are just some of how education is integrated into the foreign policy strategy of Pakistan. Such efforts not only lead towards the stability of the region but also make Pakistan a goodwill partner in the academic and diplomatic world. Educational diplomacy can only be understood under the international relations theory. One can understand it either as a strategic competition tool that is also consistent with the logic of neorealism or as an instrument of institutionalized collaboration, which is also consistent with neoliberal institutionalism. This twofold meaning is filled with depth of understanding the concept as education can be applied to both realist demands of force and security and liberal demands of interdependence and common development (Smith, 2008).

3. Literature Review

The study of educational diplomacy has gained significant attention within International Relations, where scholars interpret cross-border academic initiatives through competing theoretical lenses. Early work by Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979) emphasized the primacy of power and structural constraints in shaping state behaviour. From this neorealist perspective, education-related exchanges are viewed as extensions of geopolitical strategies used to cultivate influence, secure future

elites, and maintain relative gains. Studies on the Fulbright Program and Confucius Institutes often highlight how major powers embed ideological and strategic narratives within academic outreach. These works collectively frame educational diplomacy as an indirect but deliberate exercise of soft power.

In contrast, neoliberal institutionalist literature underscores the capacity of education to promote cooperation, trust, and interdependence. Robert Keohane (1984), Joseph Nye (2004), and Ikenberry (2018) argue that institutions and norms help states overcome uncertainty, exchange information, and generate absolute gains. Educational programs such as Erasmus+, UNESCO-led learning networks, and Commonwealth scholarships illustrate how consistent interaction can reduce mistrust and support collective problem-solving. This scholarship highlights the transformative potential of academic mobility and collaborative research in building long-term partnerships.

Recent studies focusing on South Asia capture both theoretical viewpoints. Alam (2020) demonstrates that educational diplomacy can contribute to regional peacebuilding, particularly in nuclearized environments where formal diplomacy is constrained. Meanwhile, research on China–Pakistan cooperation under CPEC shows how academic collaboration simultaneously fosters interdependence and advances strategic calculations (Manhas & Singh, 2025). Literature on Pakistan–Afghanistan scholarship programs similarly reveal dual interpretations: cooperative capacity-building versus influence-generation (Allama Iqbal Scholarship Report, 2009).

3.1 Research Gap

While extensive scholarship exists on soft power, academic exchanges, and IR theory, there is limited work that directly applies Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism side-by-side to the specific case of educational diplomacy. Existing studies often analyse programs as either strategic tools or cooperative instruments but rarely integrate both frameworks to explain their dual nature.

This article addresses this gap by comparing both theories and examining how they interpret the same educational initiatives differently, particularly in the context of Pakistan, China, the United States, and South Asia's security environment.

4. Theoretical Framework

International Relations (IR) theory assists in the explanation of how states act and how states interact in the international system. Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are among the two schools of thought that are the most prevalent in explaining why states behave as they do, cooperate, and compete. Although both recognize the anarchical condition of the international system, they differ radically in their presumptions concerning the nature of power, the values that they hold, and the future of cooperation. These theories are important in analysing the way educational diplomacy is exercised and construed in international politics. It is also known as neorealism or structural realism, and it was Kenneth Waltz who spearheaded its propagation in *Theory of International Politics* 1979. It claims that the international system is anarchic, and there exists no common power above sovereign states in this anarchic system. States are the key participants, and they are mainly interested in their survival. The issue of power, specifically military and economic aspects of it, becomes the defining factor of a state in the world order hierarchy (Rosato, 2015).

Neorealism underlines that states pursue relative benefits, not absolute gains. This implies that a state will not only strive to elevate its own status, but it is also responsive to the danger of its competitors acquiring more. Competitiveness is the cause of a continuous scuffle over security, alliances, and power play. Even seemingly friendly projects like cultural or educational exchange are regarded as tools to benefit the strategic purposes and power of the nations. According to the neorealist view, educational diplomacy is not a selfless act but a thin disguise of power politics through scholarships given to foreign students; this can be a scheme to nurture future elites who will not turn against the

country offering them the scholarship. Equally, educational partnerships can be used as avenues to the promotion of strategic discourses, gaining of leverage, and even technology transfer (Morgenthau, 1948).

For example, U. S. and Chinese educational programs in Africa are often interpreted not as mere goodwill gestures but as efforts to compete for long-term political and economic influence on the continent.

Neoliberal Institutionalism provides an alternate view of how the state's actions in an anarchic system would be understood. Led by theorists like Robert Keohane (*After Hegemony*, 1984), it tolerates the anarchy of the international system but emphasizes that anarchy does not doom states to war but instead, they can establish enduring cooperation via international institutions, norms, and regimes. Neoliberals, in contrast to neorealists, believe that in many cases the states are interested in absolute gains, that is, in the overall benefits of cooperation, notwithstanding the gains of other states as well. The institutions decrease the uncertainty by supplying rules, information-sharing, and dispute resolution mechanisms; thus, cooperation becomes predictable and less risky. It is in this sense that educational diplomacy is not an instrument of power politics but a gateway towards mutual advantage, a means of trust and interdependence. The exchange programs, scholarships, and international networks of research are perceived to promote long-term cooperation by forming common bodies of knowledge and connecting states with interpersonal relationships (Ikenberry, 2018). Programs such as the Erasmus Program in Europe or other global education programs by UNESCO show how education can work as a common good towards enhancing collective solutions to problems, as opposed to benefiting the interests of a single, powerful state.

5. Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, theory-driven analytical approach grounded in conceptual, comparative, and interpretive methods. Since the objective is to examine how Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism explain educational diplomacy, the study relies on thematic analysis of secondary literature, theoretical texts, policy documents, and scholarly publications.

5.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is qualitative and theoretical, based on a comparative analysis of IR theories and focuses on conceptual interpretation rather than empirical measurement.

5.2 Data Sources

The study draws on foundational texts of Neorealism (Waltz, Mearsheimer, Morgenthau), Neoliberal Institutionalism (Keohane, Nye, Ikenberry), academic research on soft power, educational exchanges, and global diplomacy, policy documents such as reports on Fulbright, Confucius Institutes, CPEC, and Allama Iqbal Scholarships, and case studies from Pakistan, China, and the U.S.

5.3 Method of Analysis

Methods of analysis employed for this research include comparative theoretical analysis for assessing how each theory interprets educational diplomacy, Case-based interpretation for Pakistan, U.S., and China used as illustrative examples, Content analysis for understanding how narratives reflect strategic or cooperative motivations, and Contextual analysis for linking educational diplomacy to regional geopolitics, especially in South Asia.

5.4 Justification of Method

Since the aim is to explain theoretical implications, conceptual analysis is the most appropriate method. Educational diplomacy is not directly measurable through numerical data alone; instead, its

interpretation requires unpacking motivations, narratives, and institutional behaviour. The qualitative framework allows for flexibility in comparing multiple examples and placing them within broader IR debates.

6. Neorealism and Educational Diplomacy

According to neorealists, this kind of educational diplomacy is not a neutral and altruistically driven activity but a continuation of state power and strategic rivalry. Similarly to the way military alliances and economic agreements are meant to maximize the relative gains. They are using educational programs to establish an impact on future elites, disseminate national stories, and attain a superiority in the international system. Academic exchanges and scholarship programs are seen by states as long-term strategic placement, especially in geopolitically strategic regions. When viewed in the light of neorealism, such means as scholarships and exchange programs can act as a tool to influence the mentality of foreign students and create a positive impression of the host state. Fulbright, a program in the United States, is not only a cross-cultural exchange but it is also a strategic tool to produce pro-American elites in recipient states (Smith, 2008).

In its turn, China, as a rival in efforts to establish Chinese values and stories, thus increasing its geopolitical presence and opposing the Western hegemony, frequently charges the Confucius Institutes in China. Neorealism also describes the theory of competitive educational diplomacy between the great powers; an example is that both China and the United States invest heavily in their educational programs in Africa. They are not only goodwill gestures but plans on how to exert influence on the people with new economies, resource accessibility, and political alignment in the long term. Educational partnership in this kind of view is an indirect expected power project battlefield where every state aims to restrict the other one. The educational diplomacy of Pakistan can be viewed through the prism of neorealism as well. Historically, the country has provided thousands of grants to Afghan scholars, especially following the Soviets invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as well as the war on terror instigated by the U. S. Although these scholarships were provided as an act of goodwill, they were also meant to help foster the development of Afghan elites, who would be vulnerable to Pakistan strategic interests in the region. Under the Allama Iqbal scholarship program, Pakistan has been providing over 6000 scholarships to Afghan students since 2009. Pakistan has established long-term control in the political, economic, and security environment of Afghanistan by training Afghan students in Pakistani universities. The other example is the education partnership under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), although it is commonly framed as reciprocal development. According to neorealism, the Pakistani scholarships and universities funded by China have strategic interests. Through laying eggs in educational institutions in Pakistan, China not only enhances the power of soft platforms but also ensures its friendship with South Asia in the presence of regional competitors like India and the United States. To Pakistan, it is prudent to accept the Chinese assistance in the education sector to improve its relative profits by offsetting the regional superiority of India. The fact is that since 2013, China has awarded more than 20000 scholarships to Pakistani students, and many of them were CPEC-related (Lo, 2016).

Within this context, mistrust limits educational programs. States take care lest their investment in education abroad contribute to the development of potential competitors, such as in the case of Pakistan, its worry regarding Indian educational outreach in South Asia, or the U.S. worry about Chinese academic partnership in U.S. universities; education, seemingly friendly, is nevertheless involved in the logic of security and rivalry as expected.

7. Neoliberal Institutionalism and Learning Diplomacy

Neoliberal Institutionalism provides a significantly different conception of educational diplomacy, though admitting the anarchic form of the international system, it claims cooperation is possible and desirable when states perceive absolute gains to be valuable. The educational interactions, collaborative research, and institutionalized learning are not only an instrument of strategic

competition but also a chance of building trust, long-term cooperation, and mutual development. Institutions and norms lower the uncertainty, create a framework of interaction, and create interdependence between the states. International and regional institutions, which have already been recognized in neoliberal institutionalists as pivotal arenas, are where educational diplomacy can collaborate and cooperate in engaging with each other programs like the Erasmus+ program of the European Union can show how states may help to institutionalize academic mobility as a means of encouraging integration and the minimization of mistrust and the building up of a sense of identity. On the same note, a response can be given to the Global Education 2030 Agenda of UNESCO, which offers a framework wherein states will collaboratively achieve universal education and cross-border cooperation, which would strengthen the perception of liberal institutionalism based on cooperation. In contrast to the neorealist approach that regards scholarships as a manipulative weapon, neoliberal institutionalism tends to attribute its purpose to building on, which is a fascinating reciprocal understanding and a cultural experience. As an example, the Fulbright program, as a method of advancing U.S. soft power, has had the effect of producing a system of scholars who also help in global scientific collaboration and the solution of problems. Similarly, the Confucius Institutes of China, through this prism of understanding, can be explained as forums to learn the language and appreciate the culture, which provide chances to discuss the subject instead of fighting against it. The context of Pakistan is portrayed under neoliberal institutionalism and thus can be seen in the fact that the nation is actively involved in multilateral educational programs. Pakistan is a signatory to UNESCO and regularly plays a role in education programs, development programs, higher education reforms, and literacy campaigns. In addition, Pakistan enjoys commonwealth scholarship programs, which intensify the academic connectivity of the country with more than one country simultaneously, and such relations are not merely the strategic- but rather the cooperative models to enable Pakistan to absorb its human capital as well as work towards advancing the international learning objectives. Examples of what can be put in a framework of neoliberal institutionalism can also be found in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In addition to economic endeavours, CPEC has facilitated academic connections, including joint research centres, faculty exchange as well and scholarships to Pakistani students studying in China. These efforts result in interdependence and more opportunities to share development and a lessening of chances of conflict by creating greater cooperation, according to a liberal view. In contrast to the neorealist way of policy-focusing on strategic containment, according to neoliberal institutionalism, the integration of mutual benefits is testified by the academic cooperation of CPEC (Neha Manhas, 2025).

The Pakistani scholarship that offers the Afghan students could also be read along this line, with the neorealists viewing it as a tool of influence. The neoliberal institutionalists highlight their cooperative advantages through educating the Afghan youths in Pakistan. Such educational programs create interconnections across borders and among people, facilitate the rebuilding of Afghanistan, and increase regional stability by using networks of academicians in the example of states to overcome the fundamental contest of pure competition in favour of collaborative security. In this sense, educational diplomacy is used to deal with such global challenges as poverty, inequality, climate change, and extremism. The point is that cross-border health, environmental, and technology research partnerships demonstrate the effectiveness of academic cooperation as a source of collective goods that individual states cannot produce individually. This supports the neoliberal assertion that the role of educational diplomacy should not be understood merely in terms of relative power but of the generation of outcomes that become productive to the international community in general.

8. Comparative Theoretical Implications

Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism provide entirely different conceptualizations of educational diplomacy. Neorealism presupposes the international system of anarchy that compels states to unceasing competition, where educational programs are regarded as a means of strategic power. In response, Neoliberal Institutionalism states that even in the state of anarchy, states can collaborate significantly using institutions and normative rules, and educational diplomacy is one arena in which long-term partnerships and mutual gains can be achieved. Scholarships, academic

exchanges, and university partnerships are perceived as the instruments of subtle power projection by neorealists. A scholarship provided to international students is not so generous; it is an investment in the creation of future elites that can benefit the sending country. Neoliberal institutionalists, on the other hand, see the same initiative as a mutually beneficial cooperative arrangement where the donor and the recipient gain from each other through cross-cultural learning, exchange of knowledge, and mistrust between societies. Among the most acute variations in the two theories is the concept of gains. Neorealists focus on relative benefits whereby the interest of a state is that its competitors are gaining more than it is expected through the processes of education, an example is the U.S. worries regarding the number of Chinese students joining American universities. In comparison, neoliberal institutionalism points to absolute gains, making it clear that both nations gain something in the case of academic cooperation, even though one of them may gain more than the other. This reasoning underpins the fact that multilateral scholarship programs and academic networks remain successful even in the backdrop of geopolitical toughness. Neorealists are not very much optimistic about institutions; they consider them as mere shadows of interests of those powerful states; therefore, organizations like UNESCO or Erasmus+ designed by the EU are being viewed as the instruments of powerful actors, even inside such an institution, there are those neoliberal institutionalists who claim that such institutions lead to a reduction of transaction costs, the development of trust, and the creation of structures of continuing collaboration (Global Education Monitoring Report 2017/18).

When made institutional, educational diplomacy offers a predictable model that reduces mistrust and permits the states to interact, even in a tense political environment. The Pakistan case also brings out the conflicting theoretical implications. In neorealism, scholarships offered by Pakistan to Afghan students are perceived as a strategic initiative with a view to ensuring a voice in Afghanistan as well as offsetting the Indian outreach towards Afghanistan. The same initiative under neoliberal institutionalism is perceived as a cooperative gesture to foster regional peace and stability in education. Likewise, the academic tie-ups of CPEC can be viewed through the neorealist lens to be an effort to balance India and the U.S. by China and the neoliberal institutionalists to point to the growth in interdependence and mutual growth between Pakistan and China. This comparative study shows that the understanding of educational diplomacy is closely dependent upon the theoretical perspective used. Neorealism focuses on the continuation of competition. Untrust and tactical reason, and instability neoliberal institutionalism demonstrates the transformative opportunities of institutions, cooperation, and interdependence. Neorealism makes sense because states are still apprehensive about academic collaboration, whereas neoliberalism helps to understand why academic exchange and global interdependence continue to grow despite geopolitical tensions (Alam, 2020).

9. Case Studies: Pakistan, China, and the United States in Educational Diplomacy

To see the pragmatic aspect of educational diplomacy, it is more effective to consider the way in which educational initiatives are upheld by Pakistan, China, and the United States as an element of foreign policy and how they are perceived by others. These examples demonstrate not only the strategic logic that was stressed by neorealism, but also the potential of cooperation that has been accentuated by neoliberal institutionalism. Scholarships of Afghan students in Pakistan have long been a weapon of soft power; thousands of Afghans have been studying in Pakistani schools, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in Afghanistan by the Soviets in the U.S.-led war on terror. In a neorealist sense, such scholarships are beneficial to the strategic interests of Pakistan since they can produce Afghan elites who can still be responsive to the political and security interests of Islamabad. However, the way scholarships are taken is significant. The opportunity is regarded by many Afghan students as a real help in the reconstruction of the human capital of Afghanistan, which can be regarded as the neoliberal institutionalist logic of cooperation. Critics of them among Afghan commentators accuse them of influence-building, encouraging dependence on Pakistan, instead of encouraging actual equality. This two-sided attitude demonstrates that the same initiative may be viewed as a tool of power employed strategically or a collaborative tool of maintaining the stability of the region (Allama Muhammad Iqbal Scholarships for Afghan Students, 2009).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has not just limited its scope to infrastructure but also broadened its scope in education with joint research centres, faculty exchanges, and Pakistani students having a chance to study in China through scholarship. These agreements are to enhance durable collaboration and cultural literacy. From the perspective of a liberal institutionalist, they are an attempt to establish interdependence, lessening the mistrust, and facilitating common growth. These opportunities are viewed by many Pakistani students as getting technical systems, career opportunities, and improving the image of China as a stable collaborator. Meanwhile, Neorealist critics note that these alliances are in the strategic interests of China in the sense that they entrench its presence in the academic and technological infrastructures of Pakistan censure that the attempts are intensifying the lack of balance of dependency since they form the view of China not simply as a partner but as a dominant power who imposes its principles and creates a stable advantage. The Confucius institutes, which are situated in China, can perhaps be the most evident manifestation of education as diplomacy, as these language and cultural centres have spread all over the world, introducing Chinese traditions, values, and orientations to international audiences. They allow neoliberal analysis as forums of intercultural communication and international interaction; their reception has not been uniform at all. In many host countries. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the Confucius Institutes have been criticized as lacking scholarly freedom, propagating selective narratives, and acting as tools of propaganda. Some schools of higher learning have even been shut down because of political interference. This underscores the fact that neorealist distrust of educational diplomacy is often not overt competitive action on a pure cooperative basis. Therefore, the Confucius Institutes are a representation of the clash between liberal principles of mutuality and understanding and the interests of realists concerning power and domination. The Fulbright program of the United States is one of the oldest and most effective educational diplomacy tools. It has funded generations of foreign students, including most of the South Asian students, to attain higher education in American institutions. Over 8000 Fulbright grants had been awarded across the globe in 2023 alone, with 189 grants awarded in Pakistan alone (FY2023-Annual-Report_VEF, 2023).

The program, according to the neoliberal view of international institutions, is a true investment in international collaboration, academic interchange, and networks of problem solving, of which many Fulbright alumni report describing their experiences as personal growth and intercultural understanding, and long-term professional relationships. However, neorealist explanations cannot be disregarded. Critics claim that Fulbright scholarships breed pro-American elites who usually bring home with them the U.S values and tastes - further consolidating the impact of Washington throughout the world. Although the program is, undoubtedly, the means of mutual learning, it is also an instrument of soft power that enhances the American strategic standing in the long term.

10. Nuclearization and Educational Diplomacy in South Asia

Nuclearization of South Asia has had a significant impact on geopolitics in the region, both as a barrier as well as an opportunity for educational diplomacy since India and Pakistan held nuclear tests in 1998. Instead, nuclear deterrence has at least negated outright wars, however, at the cost of the deeply rooted mistrust and hostility. Such competitions have much further-reaching effects in the non-military context of the interaction of scholarly, cross-border scholarship, research, and cultural programs. In this respect, Nuclearization cannot be examined outside of the context of educational diplomacy, but it gives the structural environment where diplomacy finds it difficult to maintain its footing, or it is actively used as a confidence-building instrument. Nuclearization limits educational diplomacy according to the views of neorealists. Whenever nuclear crises break out, such as the Kargil conflict of 1999, the 2001-2002 military confrontation, or when the searchlight is switched off or severely reduced, when student exchanges and joint research projects between India and Pakistan have suffered or been forced to shut down, Neorealism stresses relative gains, security dilemmas, and mistrust, all easy to find in South Asia. Scholastic connections, even though apparently collaborative, are frequently understood strategically. Scholarships can be regarded as efforts to shape the future elites. Cross-border research is regarded as a way of transferring sensitive information such as

Pakistan has often objected to Indian educational penetration of Afghanistan, believing it was enhancing the strategic power of New Delhi. Equally, Indian policymakers have been worried by the fact that China has been increasing its academic presence in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

These cases demonstrate that the logic of nuclearized rivalry reduces the possibility of true academic collaboration since all actions are perceived through the prism of competition and relative advantage. The neoliberal institutionalist school of thought says it offers various readings even in the face of nuclear tensions; educational diplomacy has been an instrument of dialogue and trust-building when political or other avenues are closed off. Track-II diplomacy programs like academic conferences, peace discussions convened by think tanks, and cultural exchange programs have given scholars and students the means to continue communication even during official hostile regimes, e.g., in the form of common research projects under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation SAARC and attending UNESCO programs. Pakistani scholarships for Afghan students and as part of CPEC collaboration projects are other examples of how education can be used as a collaboration tool, and neorealists can view them as instruments of strategy. Neoliberals want to underline that they promote contacts between people, areas, and knowledge sharing inside networks. Food within the dilemma is that nuclearization restricts and combines the need for educational diplomacy at the same time. Nuclear competition breeds mistrust and restrains the desire of states to support cross-border academic programs. Contrastingly, nuclear weapons increase the stakes of the miscalculation and escalation. Educational exchanges have proved to be one of the few comparatively safe mechanisms of creating mutual understanding. Scholarly partnerships in areas like climate change, communal wellbeing, and poverty reduction provide a successful example of how states can team up with one another on issues that are not connected to security, even though there are profound strategic challenges.

These exchanges are leading to a gradual yet significant process of trust-building by encouraging interdependence and decreasing cultural barriers. The future of educational diplomacy in South Asia will thus hinge upon the ability of the states to weigh their nuclearized competition against the necessity to collaborate, which may be simply considered within the framework of the neorealist approach. Academic efforts will continue to suffer at the hands of crises, increasing nationalism, and the quest for relative advantage. However, as viewed through the lenses of neoliberal institutionalists, educational diplomacy is a way to stability as institutionalized cooperation and long-term academic networks can eventually melt mistrust. The nuclearization creates aggression. One of the rare tools that the region can use to seek to shift towards dialogue, interdependence, and subsequently peace is educational diplomacy (Kahl, 2020).

11. Analysis and Discussion

Educational diplomacy occupies a complex position in IR theory, and its interpretation varies drastically depending on the theoretical lens applied. The analysis below compares how Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism interpret the same initiatives differently.

11.1 Educational Diplomacy as Power Politics (Neorealist Lens)

Neorealism argues that states use academic programs to build influence and shape future elites. Examples from the article include the U.S. Fulbright Program, which is interpreted as producing pro-American elites; Chinese Confucius Institutes, viewed as spreading Chinese narratives; Pakistan's scholarships for Afghan students, interpreted as securing political leverage; and CPEC educational cooperation, seen as China increasing strategic depth in Pakistan. Neorealists emphasize relative gains, security concerns, strategic competition, and informal influence-building. Thus, education is a subtle extension of state power.

11.2 Educational Diplomacy as Cooperation (Neoliberal Institutional Lens)

Neoliberal Institutionalism interprets the same initiatives as tools for interdependence, trust-building, information-sharing, and long-term stability. Examples include UNESCO programs promoting collaborative learning, Erasmus+ reducing mistrust in Europe, CPEC academic centres fostering shared innovation, and Pakistan–Afghanistan scholarships serving as regional peacebuilding initiatives. Neoliberals highlight absolute gains, institutional rules and norms, mutual benefits, and long-term cooperation.

11.3 Dual Nature in Nuclearized South Asia

The nuclear environment heightens mistrust (Neorealism) while simultaneously increasing the need for cooperation (Neoliberalism). This duality appears in restricted India–Pakistan academic exchanges, the rise of Track-II dialogues, SAARC academic initiatives, and shared research on climate, health, and development. Thus, educational diplomacy is both constrained and necessary in South Asia.

11.4 Synthesis

The analysis reveals that Neorealism explains competition and strategic motives, while Neoliberal Institutionalism explains cooperation and trust-building. Educational diplomacy contains elements of both power and partnership. Understanding this duality enhances policy design, especially for Pakistan.

12. Conclusion

Educational diplomacy is now a more prominent tool of statecraft. Giving states chances to exert influence, to gain trust, to sign long-term relations without the use of the traditional instruments of military and economic influence, the fact is that its interpretation is highly dependent on the theoretical prism used. In terms of neorealism, educational programs are looked at with suspicion because most are constructed on a strategic interest of maximizing relative benefits and modelling future elites in a manner that is beneficial to the donor state. Such initiatives as the scholarships of Pakistani students in Afghanistan, such institutes as Confucius in China, and the Fulbright in the US are then perceived as the quiet manifestations of power politics, but this time bound by mistrust and geopolitical rivalry. According to the views of a neoliberal institutionalist, the same initiatives are channels of collaboration, understanding, and total benefits. International organizations, bilateral agreements, and multilateral networks, including those of UNESCO, Erasmus +, or the academic relationships of CPEC, show the way in which institutions and norms allow states to overcome competition and make joint contributions to systemic education, social development. In these two logics lies educational diplomacy. Neorealism states why states are alert, competitive, and strategic in their scholarly outreach, and neoliberal institutionalism suggests the long-lasting expansion of cooperation and interdependence despite combined geopolitical conflicts. Combining the two theories will grant a more improved insight into the dualistic role of educational diplomacy, both as an instrument of power and rivalry, and as a means of dialogue and partnership. Policymakers and scholars should understand this duality. It highlights the anticipated limitations and the transformational possibilities of education in international relations.

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