European Science Diplomacy at a Moment of Strategic Reckoning

Clara Solé*
Head, Internationalisation & Science Diplomacy, Institut de Ciències del Mar (ICM-CSIC), Barcelona, Spain
E-mail: crsole@icm.csic.es

The 2nd European Science Diplomacy Conference unfolded against a backdrop that felt less transitional and more transformational. Science diplomacy is no longer a niche practice situated at the margins of research cooperation or foreign policy. It is becoming a structural component of how Europe understands power, sovereignty, competitiveness, and global responsibility.

What emerged from the discussions was not simply endorsement of science diplomacy's relevance. Rather, the conference revealed a field in the midst of consolidation and tension. European science diplomacy is being institutionalised through a common framework at precisely the moment when geopolitical fragmentation, technological acceleration, and strategic rivalry are redefining the terms of global engagement. The question is no longer whether Europe should pursue science diplomacy, but how it can do so without undermining either its openness or its strategic interests.

Openness Under Pressure

European research cooperation has long been grounded in multilateralism and the circulation of knowledge. The often-repeated formula — "as open as possible, as closed as necessary" — captures an ethos that has shaped EU research policy for decades. Yet the conference made clear that this balance is becoming increasingly delicate.

Science and technology are now inseparable from economic resilience, industrial policy, and national security. Rapid technological development has intensified the strategic value of research. In this environment, openness is no longer an unquestioned virtue but a condition to be calibrated.

The proposal to integrate a "fifth freedom" — the free movement of knowledge — into the Single Market reflects recognition that Europe's economic model must evolve in response to this new reality.[1] Knowledge is not merely an input to innovation; it is a geopolitical asset. At the same time, concerns about dual-use technologies, intellectual property, and research security underscore a growing awareness that interdependence can create vulnerability.

The tension is structural. If Europe closes itself in the name of security, it risks undermining the collaborative foundations of its scientific excellence. If it remains indiscriminately open, it risks strategic dependency. Science diplomacy sits precisely at this intersection.

Institutionalisation as a Response to Fragmentation

The emergence of a European Framework for Science Diplomacy signals a shift from fragmented

* https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3253-2559

practice to coordinated strategy.[2] For years, science diplomacy initiatives across Member States evolved organically through diaspora networks, embassy initiatives, or ministry-level experimentation. The framework reflects a recognition that coherence is now necessary.

National examples discussed during the conference illustrate different pathways toward institutionalisation. France's early strategy and its current update reflect adaptation to a more competitive global landscape. Slovenia's creation of a science diplomacy department and dedicated embassy fund shows how operational mechanisms are being embedded within foreign ministries. Spain's engagement with scientific networks abroad demonstrates the importance of transnational communities. Denmark's continued scientific engagement despite political tensions highlights the resilience of research ties.

These examples do not point toward uniformity, but toward convergence. Science diplomacy is moving from being an optional add-on to becoming part of Europe's strategic toolkit. Yet institutionalisation does not eliminate ambiguity. Rather, it formalizes the space in which competing priorities — economic, security-related, normative — must be reconciled.

The Securitisation Dilemma

Perhaps the most revealing debates concerned the securitisation of science. The discussion extended beyond classical national security to encompass economic competition and technological leadership. The categories of "critical technologies" and "dual use" now occupy central policy space.

A metaphor captured the dilemma: is science a dial or a switch? If treated as a switch, research can be abruptly curtailed through classification or exclusion. If treated as a dial, openness can be adjusted with proportionality.[3]

The risk of over-securitisation is evident. If every critical technology is framed as a potential weapon — whether military or economic — the logic of precaution may overwhelm the logic of collaboration. Yet the counterpoint is equally compelling: ignoring risk is no longer viable in a context where technological dependencies can have systemic consequences.

What emerged from the debate was not a binary answer, but an insistence on symmetry between risk and benefit. Security measures must be proportional and effective, not reflexive. Science diplomacy, in this sense, becomes a mechanism of calibration. Its role is to prevent necessary safeguards from sliding into indiscriminate closure.

Multilateral Governance and the Politics of Knowledge

Ocean governance discussions offered a concrete illustration of science diplomacy in action. Negotiations on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction and seabed governance demonstrate how scientific expertise shapes legal regimes. At the same time, they expose structural inequalities.

Research funding influences whose knowledge informs policy. Implementation gaps reveal the limits of negotiated agreements. The growing role of private actors in data collection raises questions about access, ownership, and accountability. Meanwhile, traditional and indigenous knowledge remains marginal in many formal processes, partly because it does not conform to dominant methodological standards.

These dynamics are not unique to ocean governance. They reflect broader political economies of knowledge production. Science diplomacy does not operate in a neutral epistemic space; it is embedded in hierarchies of funding, methodology, and influence.

Similarly, anticipatory governance initiatives emphasize that diplomacy must engage with emerging technologies before crises unfold. The lesson from recent global challenges is that delayed coordination carries high costs. Anticipation, however, requires trust, foresight, and sustained investment — resources unevenly distributed across regions.

Science Diplomacy, Peace and Strategic Competition

Throughout the conference, science diplomacy was also framed as a pathway toward peace. Examples of scientific collaboration in politically sensitive contexts illustrate how technical engagement can open channels that formal diplomacy struggles to sustain.

Yet this normative aspiration coexists with a more realist recognition: diplomacy is rarely detached from national interest. The question is whether science diplomacy can expand the space for mutual gain, or whether it ultimately mirrors geopolitical competition.

Engagement with the Global South makes this tension visible. Africa's limited share of global R&D investment underscores structural disparities. But the Global South is not confined to Africa. Asia and Latin America are equally central to the future of global science, innovation, and sustainability. Climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, health resilience, and digital governance cannot be addressed without meaningful participation from these regions.

If Europe approaches partnerships primarily through a lens of strategic competition, concerned that "others" might gain influence, cooperation risks becoming transactional. If, instead, partnerships are grounded in shared agenda-setting and capacity-building, science diplomacy can strengthen global resilience while enhancing Europe's credibility.

Global South as a Measure of Credibility

The European Framework aspires to coherence within Europe. Its broader significance, however, will be judged by how it engages beyond itself.

Three issues are particularly salient. First, funding asymmetries shape agenda-setting power. When those who finance research also define priorities, partnerships can become structurally unequal. Genuine co-creation requires mechanisms that redistribute not only resources, but voice.

Second, institutional models are not universally transferable. Establishing science diplomacy units or dedicated embassy funds may be feasible within European administrative systems, but less so in contexts where public institutions face resource constraints. Flexibility and contextual adaptation are essential.

Third, normative commitments such as academic freedom, integrity, and openness must be advanced through dialogue rather than projection. If these principles are framed as conditions imposed rather than values negotiated, trust erodes.

In this sense, the Global South can serve as a measure of whether European science diplomacy can reconcile strategic autonomy with equitable partnership. The credibility of the framework depends not only on internal alignment but on external perception.

Governing Interdependence

The conference conveyed a field that is no longer searching for relevance but grappling with responsibility. European science diplomacy is consolidating at a time when interdependence is both indispensable and contested.

The central challenge is governance: how to manage interdependence without sliding into either naïve openness or defensive fragmentation. The European Framework seeks to institutionalize that balance. Whether it succeeds will depend on sustained political commitment, proportional security measures, and partnerships that extend beyond Europe's immediate strategic horizon.

Science diplomacy cannot resolve geopolitical rivalry. But it can shape how interdependence is governed. In an era defined by uncertainty, that task is neither technical nor secondary. It is strategic.

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