Science Diplomacy in 2022: More Cooperation or More Division?

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This article is an extension of what was discussed during the WebDebate 'Science diplomacy in 2022: More Cooperation or More Division?' held on **5 April 2022.** It was organised by Diplo within the framework of the International Forum on Diplomatic Training (IFDT).



The session was moderated by **Dr Katharina E. Höne** (Director of Research, Diplo) and the speakers were **Dr Kimberly Montgomery** (Director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)) and **Mr Alexis Roig** (CEO of SciTech DiploHub and Barcelona's Chief Science and Tech Envoy).

The main focus of this debate was to understand the nuances of Science Diplomacy and to deliberate on the following formidable yet important questions:

- What are the current trends in science diplomacy?
- What actors, topics and challenges are becoming more relevant in 2022?
- Will we see more cooperation or more divisions?
- How can the practice of science diplomacy contribute to cooperation across divides and even in the face of conflict?

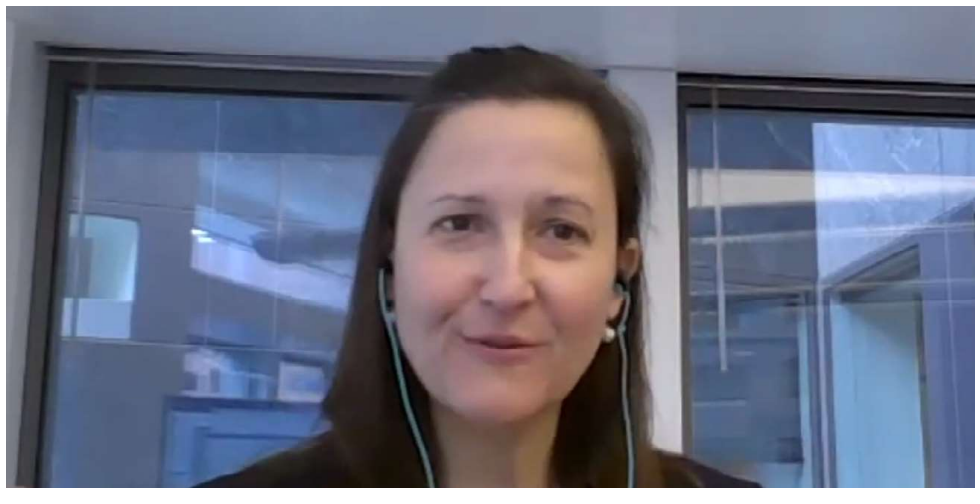
To begin with, Dr Hone highlighted the importance of Science Diplomacy and how the concept is rapidly evolving and creating an impact on strengthening relationships and connections between different nations based on science and technology. She also stated a few famous examples of unexpected cooperation and scientific collaboration between rival countries, such as SESAME (Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East), an experimental facility in Jordan, whose founding members include Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority and Turkey. Another historical example quoted by her was the famous 'Apollo–Soyuz handshake' during the 'space race' and the 'Cold War' between the USA and the Soviet Union. Thus, Science diplomacy is believed to be one of the tools to foster collaboration among states and other stakeholders. It can lead to improved mutual understanding and more peaceful international relations.



Dr Katharina E. Höne, Director of Research, Diplo

Science Diplomacy: Current Trends and Limitations

Science diplomacy is developing and changing in the last couple of years with new emerging trends. Major areas were pointed out in which science diplomacy has changed in recent years. The first was **regional expansion** and it was elucidated with the help of two cases: 'Apollo–Soyuz handshake' and the SESAME project in the Middle East. Dr Montgomery remarked that the national governments have increased their focus and are forming new strategies for science diplomacy. She mentioned a recent visit of a French Ambassador to the USA, where he discussed France's Science Diplomacy strategies which are focused on boosting partnerships between research institutes and public diplomacy by supporting research, development and innovation. Likewise, many countries are looking forward to fostering international scientific cooperation with countries having challenging relationships and an **evidence-based foreign policy**.



Dr Kimberly Montgomery, Director, International Affairs and Science Diplomacy, American Association for the Advancement of Science

Recent years have seen many countries like France weigh in on the major issues of multilateral science diplomacy like global health care and climate change resulting in significant achievements like the Paris agreement. It can be safely said that science and technology have moved from the sidelines to the forefront and have become an inevitable part of foreign affairs. A better partnership between international institutes, supporting R&D and innovation has been noticed. Nations, even those with challenging relationships with each other, now look forward to fostering scientific collaboration almost as a foreign policy goal. An upsurge in the relevance of science in foreign affairs is mainly to look for solutions to global challenges like climate change, human rights, etc.

Even though the pandemic has propelled anti-global activities leading to a decline in international trade, investments and mobility, an opposite trend has been seen in science diplomacy in the last two years. International cooperation in science and technology has greatly intensified as the pandemic revealed and reinforced the urgent need for scientific collaboration between countries. As a result, even the general public, i.e., people other than those working directly in science diplomacy, now have a better understanding of the role of this field.

Another trend that has been noticed is an increase in the relevance of cities' urban / city ecosystems in the quest to go global while remaining anchored in national and domestic matters. Cities not only foster diversity but also have a certain degree of autonomy and are the hub of academia, science and technology and provide a significant amount of economic output. Barcelona is the forerunner in the city-led new strategies in science diplomacy, replacing old diplomatic structures and agendas which may not be relevant anymore in the digital era. Other cities like New Mexico, Shenzhen and Geneva are quick to follow the trend of 'global cities', which marks a paradigm shift in science diplomacy. A new multilayered landscape has emerged in 2019-22, and these few years have changed the scenario for years to come.



Mr Alexis Roig, CEO of SciTech DiploHub and Barcelona's Chief Science and Tech Envoy

The discussion also highlighted the significance of emerging technologies. While they are developing at an incredible speed and have the potential to solve national and global problems, they come with their share of considerable risks and unique challenges to science diplomacy. They deal with many diverse fields like AI, data science, blockchain, metaverse, etc., that have diverse applications. They may pose risks to cyber and national security like developing new weapons, phishing, malware, etc. and can cause an increase in disagreement and tension between nations. Due to the daily evolving and dynamic nature of these emerging technologies, it is necessary to draft regulations and security checks to prevent these risks. Emerging technologies should be encouraged while balancing good relations between nations. Hence, it is essential to have open dialogues between the scientific and foreign affairs community. Things can also move in the right direction if partnerships between non-government people and diplomats from national, state and city governments are encouraged. Diplomats and policymakers may not comprehend the technologies or over/under-estimate their impact without expert advice from the scientific community.

Science diplomacy has varying roles to play in difficult moments of active conflict or war. The official relationship between the US and Cuba (separated by just 90 miles of ocean) has been frozen for a long duration. But it is assumed that allowing scientists to work together and share data can have breakthroughs like developing vaccines for infectious diseases. Science diplomacy in times of mistrust, such as during the Cold War, can be instrumental in easing tension and building a bridge of understanding between nations. However, it is difficult to see science diplomacy playing an active and direct role during actual war or invasion. Its role in times of active conflict as currently between Russia and Ukraine is unclear and yet to be assessed in detail. In these dark times, we might not be able to build a new international business and economic relationships, but it should be tried hard to maintain whatever structure possible. National and subnational politics cannot be ignored or removed from the discussion, but the focus must be on cooperation between scientists. Politics has an ever-changing landscape as national parties change, which can heal or upset international relationships.

Conclusion

Science diplomacy is a fast-growing field in international relations and can become a force of good in the world. However, it can not just automatically lead to international cooperation and more peaceful relations between countries. 'Will science diplomacy survive the Russia-Ukraine conflict?' Now is the time to ask such questions which make us uncomfortable, but we need to rethink the answers as a lot of cooperation between nations is required to come up with solutions for global challenges like climate change, health, food and cyber security, and sustainable development. In the Q&A session of the web debate, attendees asked similar thought-provoking questions. For example: in this age of a multipolar world, mistrust, mis or disinformation, do institutes also shut down communication? Such conflicts put science diplomats in a difficult position. The attendees also wondered if scientists have the necessary diplomatic skills. Such debates are vital to spreading awareness. Training, skill and capacity building of next-generation scientists in international affairs and diplomacy can bridge the gap between scientific and diplomatic communities.