Addressing Global Challenges through Science Diplomacy and Knowledge Diplomacy

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Never before has the world come together to fight a common challenge such as today. What the efforts by many world leaders at different time intervals could not do, has been done by a virus. Unfortunately, though climate change has been a common threat to human existence for quite some time, it has failed to unite people across due to its differing implications on different parts of the world. That way, The Coronavirus has been a leveller; it has affected all (at least most) countries, rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped, equally. The disruption caused by COVID-19 finally has brought the world together for a common cause.

This new reality has given a new impetus to science diplomacy, where the non-state actors have gotten into action to support state actors in their hurried search for solutions through the turbulent times. It is the coming together of higher education institutions, research organizations and all stakeholders including pharmaceutical companies and other industries that have set a new high in international collaborations. Though national interests do surface in making the solutions available, the search for answers has been on common ground.

Between Science Diplomacy and Knowledge Diplomacy

The question raised here is if the pandemic raised the bar of and for science diplomacy and if it brought the idea of non-state actors led cooperation to centre-stage? Of course, academics continue to define science diplomacy in various ways: science in diplomacy, diplomacy for science and science for diplomacy[1] and debates around it continue. If diplomacy for science emphasizes the primacy of the state in facilitating scientific cooperation, science for diplomacy emphasizes the prominence of non-state actors, the scientific community. Though these are matters of academic debates, when it came to actions on the ground, at least during the pandemic, they worked simultaneously with both state and non-state actors functioning in unison for a common purpose – unearthing causes for the pandemic and finding remedies.

Science diplomacy as an idea that lies at the intersection of science and international relations has posed new challenges to the age-old ideas of classical diplomacy. Science, by its very nature, is public and value-neutral. Therefore, when it enters the realm of international relations, either it has to alter itself or redefine international relations. For a long time, science diplomacy has only played a supplementary role in international negotiations. Most of the bilateral agreements signed between countries and regions of the world will have mentions about scientific exchanges, scientific cooperation, but as tail-enders in the documents. If positioning within a negotiated document is any indicator of significance, the pandemic may bring a considerable shift in this order.

One reality that has surfaced in recent times is the importance of non-state actors in negotiations between nations and regions. These non-state actors have kept politics at bay and have shown their ability to connect with all with an 'open science' approach.

It would be interesting to see if these non-state actors can be depended on while addressing other global challenges like climate change, hunger, poverty, illiteracy, population explosion, etc.? Can science diplomacy enable humankind in addressing these global challenges?

The central problem of science diplomacy has been definitional. What does science in science diplomacy comprise? Is it only natural sciences? Or, does it encompass social sciences? These questions also get enlarged when science, technology and innovation are combined during policy formulations thus leaving the humanities and social sciences experts wondering if they are also a part of this global exercise.

It is at this point that a few scholars like Jane Knight[2] are proposing the idea of knowledge diplomacy as a more comprehensive approach to replace science diplomacy where universities or higher education institutions as actors take this discourse beyond the usual science, technology rhetoric to include internationalization of higher education, research and innovation.

It is in knowledge diplomacy that universities as actors connect with others through the instrument of internationalization of higher education (IHE) and engage worldwide to address the global challenges. It is different from science diplomacy in the fact that it is more encompassing in terms of disciplines and activities of actors and is heavily dependent on the non-state actors. In that sense, it is more a bottom-up approach than top-down diplomacy for science, in particular. However, it does require a policy framework to facilitate it, although universities remain as driving forces.

Addressing Global Challenges and Internationalization of Higher Education (IHE)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) accepted and driven by the United Nations since 2015 try to address global challenges through 17 goals, 169 targets and 231 indicators. Among them, SDG4 — inclusive and equitable quality education, and SDG17 — strengthening global partnerships for the implementation of these goals form the basis for building the argument for knowledge diplomacy.

Global Citizenship Education (GCED) – target 4.7 particularly speaks about civic learning involving the active participation of students in addressing global challenges of social, political, economic and environmental nature. It is aimed at creating a global consciousness that in turn may help to tackle the global challenges collectively. GCED can be made possible through IHE which by its very nature has diversity at the centre of all activities if driven in its spirit.

Though GCED can also be a part of the school education, its role gets magnified at the higher education level as the understanding of problems can be followed by actions to address and, therefore, the role of higher education institutions becomes prominent.

With education entering the realm of international relations, and HEIs turning to be non-state actors in effectuating regional or global cooperation, the relation between the state and universities becomes very important.

Universities, both those funded by the state and run otherwise, have always aspired for autonomy and this at times has been defining their relationship with the state. But the aspiration to collaborate globally requires support from the state and therefore, an interaction between the state and the universities on matters of global and national importance and a shared understanding forms basis for further action. Therefore, IHE does not remain as only global aspirations of universities but a mission co-driven by the

state and the universities. What it needs is a consensus on discerning global challenges and finding ways of mitigating them.

IHE thrives in an environment where strategic infrastructure exists to facilitate it and policy coordination to augment it. It is in this direction that higher education regionalism is emerging as a new reality. Harmonizing higher education within regions with the cooperation of state actors, non-state actors and at times the supranational actors and coordination of national policies, has come to redefine the higher education landscape. The efforts of the European Union, the African Union and ASEAN in harmonizing higher education systems are already providing them with an edge over others in dealing with challenges.

These are matters of details and the only concern is that the agenda for coming together is not lost in creating mechanisms to come together through policy coordination. At times, it is also possible that these efforts can have a homogenizing effect and affect the diversity that they wish to achieve, to begin with.

One thing is clear, addressing global challenges is possible only as a collective exercise. Knowledge diplomacy, bringing together efforts of state and non-state actors like universities, can create an environment for a healthy exchange of knowledge. It is when there is disagreement on the global challenges and their implications, that SDGs can come in handy to provide a common platform for understanding policy coordination. Driven with faith and commitment to SDGs, international cooperation in the field of education led jointly by both states and universities, can ensure humanity's endurance through challenging times.

References

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