POLICY BRIEF
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S4D4C

USING SCIENCE FOR/IN DIPLOMACY
FOR ADDRESSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Why science diplomacy needs evaluative backing

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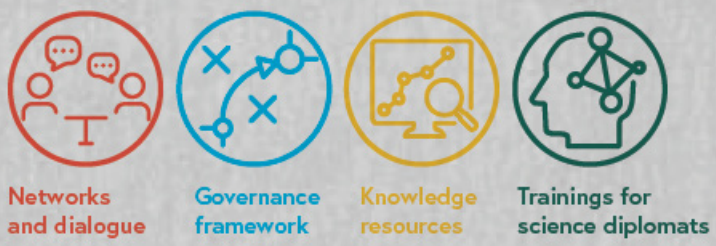
Executive Summary

The public discourse of science diplomacy has been nurtured for two decades, as actors repeatedly stressed the relevance of the concept by campaigning, showcasing and defining activities as science diplomacy. But while the effectiveness of science diplomacy remains unclear, not least as discourse on it gets hardly discerned from concrete actions, this policy brief aims proposes that diplomacy actions should be concretely evaluated. To do so, this policy brief introduces a first set of guiding ideas that policy actors may consider using when developing an evaluative framework.



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Introduction

The public discourse on science diplomacy has, by now for about 20 years, proliferated at the intersecting spheres of science, technology, innovation (STI), higher education (HE) and international relations. In this discourse, actors promised that science diplomacy would deliver solutions to exigent global challenges of our times: that dedicated international scientific collaborations will help nurture the international relations of political actors and even alleviate their tensions, and that joint solutions are developed to surmount contemporary societal challenges of cross-border reach. Moreover, science diplomacy has promised to reform traditional diplomacy by encouraging official diplomatic actors to adapt to a similar style of international scientific interaction, to integrate academic researchers as part of diplomatic missions and to win foreign societal favor by calling upon common scientific values and promoting common interests.

However, recent studies have argued that the concept of science diplomacy is in danger of losing conceptual distinctiveness (Flink 2020), as too many overdrawn promises have been made that accompany its solutionist hype (Rungius and Flink 2020) and that can hardly ever be fulfilled. In addition, attempts to define the concept do not sufficiently clarify what science diplomacy is supposed to be. On the contrary, attempts by policy practitioners (Royal Society 2010; Gluckman et al. 2017) to define the concept reify both a calling and a hubris: that ever more aspects of STI, HE and foreign affairs as well as ever more types of actors (Melchor 2020) would and should fit under its umbrella. Nowadays, these extended aspirations can only hardly be separated from facts, and neither can talk be distinguished from actual science diplomacy actions – in fact well-known standard activities in STI and HE.

This policy brief argues that the combination of discursive expansion, definitional reification and empirical lacuna of scientific reflection on science diplomacy is problematic and should be purified by evaluations of real actions. To do so, it introduces a first set of guiding ideas that policy actors may consider using when developing an evaluative framework.

The limits of expanding science diplomacy

Over the last 20 years, the public discourse[1] on science diplomacy has developed various striking features. First, because science diplomacy has not stopped proliferating ever since its initial public relations activities during the first millennial years (Fedoroff 2009; Flink and Schreiterer 2010; Flink and Rüffin 2019), which is astonishing in light of the fact that concepts often lose traction after being introduced for agenda-setting purposes (Birkland 1998; Pump 2011). But this is not the case for science diplomacy, which has enjoyed increasing attention and support of governments worldwide, and it clearly stirred their departments into various kinds of actions.

With this in mind, the second feature of science diplomacy is its integrative force of attraction. Next to expectable entities, i.e. ministries of foreign affairs (MFA) and ministries of STI, many actors without direct governmental responsibilities have been encouraged to seek for and advertise common spaces of interactions: students, researchers and experts with academic backgrounds stemming from universities, public non-university research institutes, academies and national as well as international research funding agencies, but also private consulting firms are nowadays proclaiming they would either concretely engage in science diplomacy or at least endorse it (Degelsegger-Marquez et al. 2019; Flink 2020; Young et al. 2020).

Third, science diplomacy discursively interrelates with other equally affirmative concepts, in particular grand societal challenges (Flink and Kaldewey 2018), and therefore it can be regarded a discursive merger of conceptual thinking in STI and foreign policymaking.[2]

Essentially, science diplomacy expresses a search for stability and meaningful actions in a world increasingly defined by unpredictability (Beck 1992), anthropogenic and natural hazards up to a global scale, and a sense of acceleration affecting societies (Rosa 2013), the more so as it gets undergirded by a general consciousness of global-local interrelatedness (Robinson 2009). What comes along with this conceptual expression is a massive appearance of new actors and a reconfiguration of actors' arrangements, which has led actors to believe that an agencification[3] and hybridisation of organisations was necessary as well as a new mixture of governance modes (Aukes et al. 2019). In this respect, the aspirations expressed by science diplomacy are perfectly understandable, as the concept helps actors manage their uncertainties and find new professional roles and organizational functions within a dynamically changing sectional plane of international STI and foreign policy.

1 Discourse is comprehended as "an institutionally consolidated concept of speech in as much as it determines and consolidates action and thus already exercises power" (Jäger 2001, 35).

2 Recent attempts of the British Council (Knight 2019) to introduce the term "knowledge diplomacy" do not seem to have fallen on much fertile grounds in public policy. Because arguing that science, as in science diplomacy, was confined to the natural or hard sciences and should thus be enlarged to all knowledge-producing subjects, is a marginal and outdated perspective. That international student and researchers exchanges and transnational relations of higher education institutions should play a more pivotal role in diplomacy, is what the discourse on science diplomacy stipulated anyway.

3 Agencification denotes a development in policymaking, in which (often semi-autonomous) organizations have been created to outsource and support hitherto governmental management responsibilities, mostly at arms' length to ministries.

Reification by definitions and case studies

The first hype of science diplomacy was accompanied by attempts of policy entrepreneurs to define the concept and, therewith, set the playing field of its public discourse (thoroughly discussed by Ruffini 2020). Most notably, the Royal Society (2010), synthetizing impressions from a gathering of foreign and STI policymakers and individual cultural entrepreneurs in 2009, concluded that science diplomacy can be subdivided into three dimensions: (i) science in diplomacy (i.e. expertise and advice), (ii) diplomacy for science, i.e. international political activities that help science and science policy communicate across borders, and (iii) science for diplomacy, in other words track-2 and soft power activities to keep up communication via science in tensioned political relations or winning the favor of others by the positive image and reputation of science. While this report summarised positions mostly from the Anglo-American context, it is believed to have a major impact on the public discourse (Ruffini 2020). The second heuristic was borne by empirical research on states' approaches in science diplomacy, concluding that governmental and public actors (i.e. research funding and performing entities) at the intersection of foreign and international STI policymaking are mainly following three strategic approaches: to gain access to other resources abroad (knowledge, finances, talent), to engage in promotion activities (i.e. branding one's own performance and institutions of STI and HE) and to exert influence on other actors by use of STI and HE (Flink and Schreiterer 2010). These actors' strategies do not correspond with all dimensions laid out by the Royal Society. In fact, a great deal of efforts – one might even call it the mainstream of science diplomacy – is following the rationale of diplomacy for science: governmental actors mostly take to access and promotion, but not too often to the strategy of decidedly influencing others, as most activities are supposed to hedge competitive advantages in the international footrace on STI (ibid; Flink and Rüffin 2019; Szkarłat 2020; Sabzalieva et al. 2021). Altogether, these definitions and heuristics of science diplomacy did not primarily served policy actors to distinguish what science diplomacy is – and what it is not. Rather, they served to declare that almost any STI- and HE-related activity can fit under the umbrella of science diplomacy. As a consequence, defining science diplomacy reified the concept for the discourses of STI and foreign politics, while at the same time opening its frame almost to the point that it has become a mellow anything-goes formula.

Moreover and in tacit accordance with these and other definitional attempts, numerous showcases have repeatedly highlighted the importance of science diplomacy: for the sake of evidence-based foreign affairs, the promotion of international STI, HE and for advancing an ersatz diplomacy by academic channels across regional and especially national borders (Yakushiji 2009; Royal Society 2010; Davis and Patnam 2015; Young, Flink, et al. 2020).

"Often it is unclear whether scientific studies follow an analytical purpose or one that is supposed to stabilize the political discourse of science diplomacy."

However, it is unclear whether these studies follow an analytical purpose or one that is supposed to stabilize the political discourse. For many authors investigating into and showcasing science diplomacy do not actually ask if science diplomacy

features any distinction at all, or what it means that the concept has been politically used for varying purposes. Rather, plenty of studies verify the (almost miraculous) functioning and good nature of science diplomacy and its attendant actors (Brumfiel 2004; Davis and Patnam 2015). Only in some cases are actors' constellations, concrete actions and situations, objects and needs for action as well as governance modes reconstructed (Aukes et al. 2019; Young, Rungius, et al. 2020) without actually following the normative cause, and these do offer first ideas on how to compare structural components of individual case studies. But still, most studies neglect to ask whether and how science diplomacy has imposed structural changes upon those actors' groups that either employ the term or enjoy getting associated with it. Surprisingly, the main actors of science diplomacy, i.e. ministries and science attaché networks, hardly appear in any recent study despite their prominent role (but see Flink and Schreiterer 2010; Ruffini 2017; Flink and Rüffin 2019). The same holds true for diplomatic instruments, such as international treaties and agreements, that have not been comparatively investigated (see a first exploration Rüffin and Schreiterer 2017). The effectiveness of strategic STI (funding) programs has not been analysed: neither for political purposes, where one could distinguish between foreign and STI policy, nor for scientific purposes of different layers (individual, organizational, inter-/disciplinary etc.). And if scientists are really doing a good job as quasi-diplomats and should "maybe even take the lead" in diplomacy (as purported by Lord and Turekian 2007), remains empirically unclear and cannot really be answered by speculations, reports on self-experience, or single case studies, regardless of their quantity or historical rigor. Needless to say, the scholarly debates on science diplomacy has almost totally neglected that a vibrant debate on challenges and reforms of diplomacy in general has been going on in studies and practices of international relations for decades (Constantinou et al. 2016; Lequesne 2020). The most problematic aspect, however, is that there are no fresh comparative studies in the sense that governmental coordination, dedicated instruments, such as science advice-mechanisms, agreements and funding, or the rhetorical use of concepts themselves, are accurately investigated. It is almost ironic that while proponents of science diplomacy stress their scientific grounding, they are the least scientific to themselves in their undertaking.

With this critique in mind, there should be enough room and opportunity for actors to take stock and inspect ongoing policy performance and newly proposed policies, following feedback from practitioners who want to clarify how to carry on working with the concept of science diplomacy.

Recommendations for assessing science diplomacy

While policy actions make demands on actors, their time, financial resources, cognitive capacities, and their reputation, it is understandable that actors want to know whether the specific selection of policy actions and efforts are worthwhile. In particular, this is the case in settings where

a. organizational legitimacy depends on public scrutiny and valuations within an institutional field whose actions and reactions get defined by actors thoroughly observing each other (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Perkmann and Spicer 2007), and

b. where policy actions are defined by situations of high risk, also in terms of potentially irreversible consequences (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993).

Policies that directly finance or regulate science, technology and innovation (STI) or that are strongly related to STI often confront actors with challenges of both types a) and b). First, because scientific research and technological development are not only cutting across almost all aspects of society but also a bet into an unknown and often non-projectable future. And second, because policymaking still is about promising certainties and societal improvement, at least if actors want to hold on to the agency that is being granted to them via electorate or bureaucratic appointment. Adding to these challenges, the structural properties of international relations provide even less certainties for actors to plan policies, despite the existence of facilitating institutions, such as treaties, international organisations, and diplomacy as well as lowering barriers for cross-border communication flows of all kinds since the 1990s.

Evaluations can help actors reduce such uncertainties. In an ideal setting, we can think of evaluations that can ultimately help actors assess their own or other actors' positions and outputs by addressing previous and current performance and output/outcomes with regard to specific issues (Sanderson 2002; Power 2008). Actors can decide whether evaluations are employed to distribute new or redistribute existing resources (Whitley 2003; Orr et al. 2007; Biester and Flink 2015), realign programs, rearrange staff or rather contribute to organizational learning (Mytelka and Smith 2002; Simon and Knie 2013). With respect to evaluating science diplomacy actions, the following four guiding ideas are worth considering when setting up an evaluative framework.

"Evaluations of science diplomacy can help actors reduce uncertainties. They should always scrutinize whether interactions are based on principles of fair distribution offering benefits to all participants."

1 The need for comparative momentum

Rather than dwelling on single showcases, actors are advised to set up evaluations with comparative elements, i.e. targeting at conclusive points of interest, no matter if effective resource investment and use are under scrutiny or desired outcomes. For example, actors might be interested if they are currently deploying sufficient amount of (and sufficiently competent) staff to fulfil strategic goals they seek to achieve in science diplomacy actions. These considerations in designing an evaluation, however, entail complex questions: What does a sufficient amount of staff members mean in order to reach a goal? Has an actual increase in staff led to the fulfilment of a goal, or other factors? (Why) do other organizations operate similarly or differently in light of the same goal? These and many similar questions concerning resource investments and use of instruments vis-à-vis strategic goals can only be adequately addressed by introducing benchmarks and time markers to compare sequences before and after the introduction of a science diplomacy activity. In addition, they can lead to cross-sectional assessments with comparable others on a national and international level. And most notably, they cannot be reduced to quantitative metrics, as all of the afore-raised aspects depend on the interpretation of qualitative though comparable properties.

2 Aiming for fair distribution of resources and responsibilities in bi- and multilateral settings

In general, diplomacy helps actors mediate interests across borders. As science diplomacy has been promising to nurture cooperation among actors from different states by resorting to scientific actors and their value systems, or to support actors from the science system in cross-border undertakings by offering diplomatic political support, an evaluation of science diplomacy should always scrutinize whether these interactions are based on principles of fair distribution offering benefits to all participants. Or at least, so it can be argued, on a minimum level no involved party should experience disadvantages resulting from science diplomacy activities. One level above, at least one involved party can profit from a science diplomacy activity (while others do not face any disadvantages), and on a third level all involved parties would truly benefit from such an activity. By the term party/actor, one can understand policy actors from at least two states (or international organisations) as well as from at least two different systems, i.e. science and politics. In addition, the likely consequences of actions, positive and negative ones, can be estimated as immediate output (e.g. reputation gains, establishment of multilateral funding programs, or concrete scientific evidence/technology applied to tackling international challenges) and further outcome/impact (future gains from cross-border funding programs, implications of scientifically informed decisions etc.). The most important aspect is that actions would never directly thrust any involved actor into an unfavorable position, in particular not, when interactions are founded on an asymmetrical basis of resources. This could be the case, when actors collaborate from developed and developing countries, or when actors from the civil society are addressed by joint science diplomacy activities[4].

4 Unfortunately, science diplomacy is not free of bad examples, such as allowing parachute science to happen where resources abroad were exploited and human dignity was violated. This does not mean, however, that international scientific competition as such is disreputable or always detrimental to third parties.

3 Science diplomacy on a continuum of collaboration and competition

Evaluations of science diplomacy cannot ignore the competitive (and sometimes even conflicting) sides of international relations that structure the world of STI just as any other societal realm. In this regard, actors can decide whether they want to assess (their own and others') actions in order to gain competitive advantages, to foster collaborations, yield both at the same, or if either can serve as a means to the other's end. It is essential for actors to acknowledge that competition and collaboration often structure policy and scientific actions simultaneously (e.g. aiming at collaborations with partners abroad whilst being in competitive rivalry with others who aim to get the same). In addition, while policymakers can opt for a competitive mode, funded academics might not buy into this strategic goal but reinterpret it as a way of collaborating with others. And even the contrary is possible, i.e. policy actions can be designed to strengthen international scientific collaborations, while they get reinterpreted by academics to serve their competitive ends. In this respect, assessing science diplomacy actions should not encourage actors to cherish false illusions, e.g. believing in altruistic solutionist collaborations, when there is de facto competition at hand.

4 Relating science diplomacy to other concepts

As a concept, science diplomacy finds itself next to many other programmatic descriptions in the vector of science, technology, innovation, higher education and foreign policies. Actors assessing current or future policy actions in this zone are well advised to think whether it is worth labelling and framing actions as concrete acts of science diplomacy, if they would rather choose different concepts (e.g. those that are less restricted to the sphere of diplomacy), or if they would employ several concepts at once and in specific moments of time. It is worth noting that the strategic use of STI concepts by policymakers has – often over longer periods of time – percolated into the identity work of academic researchers, who really believe in these concepts and act according to their underlying expectations. In this regard, using science diplomacy – just as well as other popular concepts in STI and foreign policymaking – should always meet concerns that concepts can unfold structuring and sometimes unintended effects on individual and collective behaviour. Finally, one should not forget that concepts with their promises can turn out to be lemons, or that due to their potential of supporting front-stage talk they can get hijacked by dubious actors, e.g. from authoritarian governments, in order to serve different purposes.

Conclusion

Since actors put considerable effort into policy actions, they regularly want to make sure that these investments are gainful to a maximum or at least satisfactory degree. With the concept of science diplomacy we can associate such concrete actions at the intersection of STI, HE and foreign policy. Yet, despite the massive discursive proliferation of science diplomacy, it remains unclear what actors concretely gain for their commitment. This lack of clarity, as was argued in this policy brief, stems from the fact that the success of discourse has turned science diplomacy almost into an all-inclusive concept operating at the loss of distinctiveness. Against this backdrop, policy actors are advised to bestow great care on using science diplomacy, and in this regard it is recommendable to engage in evaluations of actions adopted under the heading of the concept. More specifically, evaluations of science diplomacy actions should follow a comparative design (regarding time phases and/or comparable actors) with clear benchmarks.

Furthermore, since science diplomacy brings together actors from different states and systems, evaluations should ask if actions are, on a minimum level, not disadvantageous for any actor and, on a maximum level, beneficial for all. In this context, the competitive sides of science diplomacy must be taken into consideration, without disapproving them a priori. Lastly, evaluations might not only relate actions as being part of science diplomacy only, as they can also contribute to adjacent concepts and discourses. The most important aspect is that evaluations can help actors to reflect what promises can be made in the name of science diplomacy (internally within organizations, within institutional fields but also vis-à-vis a wider public) without overstretching expectations.

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