

Science Diplomacy – an inter- and transdisciplinary challenge and opportunity

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This presentation will look at the “equation” science+diplomacy=?, science=?, diplomacy=?. What we get out of combining “science” and “diplomacy” depends on what “science” and “diplomacy” each mean. “Science” means different things in different languages.

In English, “science” is de facto natural sciences, whereas “Wissenschaft” in German or “videnskab/vitenskap/vetenskap” in Scandinavian languages means all academic disciplines, humanities, natural and social sciences, technology, etc. “Science” can both describe academic disciplines and a practice.

In popular parlance, “diplomacy” can have peaceful and positive connotations, but for foreign policy practitioners and scholars simply means pursuit of state interest by diplomatic means in conjunction with military, intelligence, and other means. When speaking about (science) diplomacy and (science) diplomats, it is necessary to be clear whether speaking about the state practice of diplomacy or the disciplinary background of diplomats, which is usually social sciences and humanities (SSH).

The interdisciplinary perspective makes it clearer, what academic disciplines are at play in the equation science+diplomacy=? If science=STEM and diplomacy=SSH, we are dealing with an interdisciplinary encounter, where all involved disciplines must be aware of each other’s research questions and methodologies. If science=Wissenschaft, and we are dealing with the use of, for instance, History or Economics for foreign policy purposes, then the historian or economics scholar will often intuitively speak the same academic language as the diplomat. If science=STEM, the scientist and the diplomat may speak very different academic languages with little mutual comprehension.

Interdisciplinary encounters between STEM and SSH are often complicated. Often, STEM and SSH educated scholars have very little insight into each other’s research questions, theories, methodologies. There is gross imbalance in funding between the fields (for instance, 3% of Research Council of Norway funding goes to humanities). Academics may intuitively offer the answer of their discipline rather than considering carefully what the question is, and whether the question is really within their discipline.

Many diplomatic or foreign policy questions are not STEM questions, but SSH questions, which makes science diplomacy a potentially both challenging and rewarding interdisciplinary exchange. The STEM-scientist and the SSH-diplomat will each need to understand clearly, what are the question and answer, and whether they correspond.

It is often observed that science diplomacy is a field of many actors, state, non-state, academia, economic, civil society, etc. Applying the terms of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary is useful to think clearer about science diplomacy. The scientist and the diplomat must understand the logics and interests of different actors. Non-state actors, academia, civil society may often be more effective science diplomacy actors than the state because of independence and credibility, but all sides need to understand these logics clearly. The state needs to protect academic freedom of research to benefit.