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Science for Multilateralism

Jan Marco Müller

Flashback: 2015 had been a glorious year for multilateralism and for science diplomacy in particular:

- In April 2015, the U.S., China, Russia, the European Union, United Kingdom, Germany, and France agreed with Iran about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal. This was made possible largely through the trust built between the then U.S. Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz and the Iranian Minister for Atomic Energy Ali Akbar Salehi who met at the MIT earlier in their careers.
- In July 2015, the global community agreed on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development, providing a framework for orienting funding towards economic, social, and environmental priorities.
- In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda, rallying the nations of the world behind the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and their related targets.
- In December 2015, almost all the countries in the world agreed on the historic Paris Climate Accord, aiming to keep global warming well below 2°C with respect to pre-industrial levels.

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Just five years later, in 2020, the panorama had changed completely with multilateralism facing its deepest crisis since World War II:

- Countries were leaving international organizations. Examples included the United Kingdom leaving the European Union following the Brexit referendum and the U.S. leaving the World Health Organization (WHO) amidst a raging pandemic.
- Countries were withdrawing from international conventions and treaties. Examples included the U.S. withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord and the JCPoA, and Russia withdrawing from the Geneva Convention Protocol on War Crimes Victims.
- Countries openly considered breaking international law or hindered international processes, such as undermining the dispute settlement system of the World Trade Organization by blocking the appointment of judges.

In parallel, the world experienced a proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories via digital social media, produced to a significant extent by an entire industry of internet trolls aiming to influence public opinion. For example, the fact that several European countries decided not to join the UN Migration Pact in 2018 is considered by some commentators to have been influenced by a targeted online disinformation campaign.¹

Of even greater concern was the undermining of state agencies in some countries, alleged by some populist politicians to represent an imaginary “deep state.” Multiple examples of this war on expertise ranged from governments trying to discredit, intimidate, or dismiss civil servants who defend the evidence against the government’s political view to political appointees being nominated to lead technical agencies with the purpose of destroying the institution’s credibility from within. Against this backdrop of multilateralism and evidence-informed policy-making under siege in a number of major economies, the coronavirus appeared, forming a perfect storm. Beyond any doubt, SARS-CoV-2 is the most multilateral virus ever. No virus has ever managed to reach the most remote corners of the planet in such a short time. From the moment of zoonotic transfer, presumably in the Wuhan region, it took the virus only a few weeks to establish itself on all inhabited continents and only a few months to infect isolated tribal communities in the Amazon or on the Andaman Islands. Like global warming, but on a much shorter timescale, the virus represents a systemic challenge causing unparalleled global economic and social havoc with the death toll surpassing already two million.

Countries with a high degree of social inequities were particularly struggling to get the pandemic under control, despite very early and strict containment measures. Still, some low- and middle-income countries performed exceedingly well, especially those that learned from recent pandemic experiences. At the same time, some countries that considered themselves to be well prepared for pandemics, having high quality health care systems and sophisticated science advisory mechanisms, were among those that have performed the worst. Populist governments with an anti-science stance clearly proved to be a major pandemic risk factor. With COVID-19 unfolding, science moved to the center of political attention. Citizens were eagerly waiting for results in the search for vaccines and treatments, while governments tried to win time by keeping infection rates low. The scientific community has risen to the challenge in an impressive way and scientists across the world rushed at an unprecedented speed to develop solutions. Where in the past the development of a vaccine could easily take fifteen years, several vaccines against COVID-19 received regulatory approval following clinical trials in less than one year since the publication of the virus's genetic sequence—a truly remarkable feat.² Science advisors became prominent figures on television during the crisis, often sharing a stage with the respective head of state or government claiming to be “led by the science.” Ordinary citizens became hobby epidemiologists and journalists started reading preprints of scientific publications. All of this laid great responsibility on science, also in terms of expectation management.

The world of diplomacy has been impacted by COVID-19 in many ways, too, not just in practical terms with diplomats not being able to reach or leave their duty stations.³ COVID-19 also strained international relations. The question of which country is able to immunize its population first in order to quick-start out of the crisis became a race between nations. Some chose to take dangerous shortcuts, such as Russia, which approved its politically labeled “Sputnik V” vaccine even before entering the indispensable third phase of clinical trials and without making sufficient data available for scientific scrutiny.⁴ Other countries started using vaccines as a diplomatic tool, such as China, which promised access to vaccines mostly to countries supporting China's geopolitical positions or where China has a strategic interest, e.g. for being partners of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵ Vaccine nationalism—the “ugly face of science and politics” according to Ramsar⁶ – has become one of the many foreign and security policy dimensions of the pandemic. With high income countries buying a large part of the vaccine production in 2021, concerns have been voiced that low-income countries may risk ending up at the end of the vaccination queue, adding to global inequities and undermining regional stability.

At the same time, there are encouraging signals. 190 nations joined the COVAX facility, which was established by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), in partnership with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the World Health Organization (WHO), and will provide COVID-19 vaccines to the poorest countries.⁷ The European Union and its Member States managed to act together in the procurement of vaccines and underlined its commitment to “vaccine multilateralism”⁸ via a 2.2 billion Euro contribution to COVAX. Meanwhile, the United States elected in November 2020 a President committed to science and international cooperation, pledging to re-enter international organizations and agreements, including COVAX.

Despite these positive developments, the question arises which role science diplomacy can and should play facing this ongoing conundrum of nationalism, disinformation and a global pandemic.

Especially since the publication of the report *New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy* in 2010,⁹ which introduced the now famous three-strand definition of science diplomacy, the term has gained a lot of traction and visibility in the academic and policy discourse. However, it has also drawn a lot of criticism for being ill-defined, open for interpretation, not useful in practice, or even sensationalist.¹⁰

For sure, diplomatic services have never been strangers to science. All of them depend on departments and agencies providing situational awareness and all of them interact with the scientific community on issues ranging from global commons (Arctic, oceans, outer space, internet) to the negotiation of international treaties, e.g. regarding climate change, biodiversity, and cross-border pollution. Still, it is fair to say that the discourse around science diplomacy has rather been supply- than demand-driven in the past, with science ministries, science advisors and science diplomacy scholars being very vocal about it, but the concept itself permeating rather slowly through the diplomatic ranks. In fact, science advisors and science counsellors are still a rare breed in ministries of foreign affairs. However, the appearance of first science diplomacy strategies in recent years is a sign that the topic is gaining increasing attention among ministry leaderships.

Although it is too early to judge, COVID-19 is likely to become a game-changer when it comes to the role of science in policy, as it exposed structural weaknesses in many ministries and government entities, not just the ones in charge of international relations. In particular, the pandemic demonstrated the need to engage with natural sciences, medicine, and engineering, but also the humanities. This kind of expert advice is rarely provided by policy think tanks, which are a common information source in capitals, and it requires engaging with institutions like science academies and learned societies directly.

Moreover, COVID-19 demonstrated that strong and, most importantly, trusted technical agencies and institutions are a precondition to tackle complex crisis situations. This holds true not only at national but also at international level. The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), for instance, was hardly known beyond public health experts prior to the pandemic, but suddenly found itself in the public spotlight as one of the most reliable information sources in Europe.

As “no-one is safe until everyone is safe” (WHO), there is no doubt that the answer to the COVID-19 pandemic can only be multilateral and that international organizations and conventions must be strengthened rather than weakened in order to tackle similar common threats to humankind. Given the geopolitical climate in recent years in which diplomatic notes were frequently replaced by tweets in capital letters, diplomacy will need all the help it can get.

Hence, the most urgent support diplomats need from science right now is *science for multilateralism*, i.e. science that supports the evidence needs of multilateral policies but also speaks up and supports diplomacy when multilateral approaches come under fire, whether by domestic or foreign actors. While it is normal that science diplomacy is employed by policy-makers also to defend national interests¹¹ and scientists are not free of patriot feelings either, science must never allow to be misused for promoting nationalist or isolationist agendas.

Science is multilateral by nature. Scientists collaborate across the globe, regardless of nationalities, as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study into scientific globalism during the pandemic concluded that the proportion of publications based on international collaboration as well as the proportion of open-access publications increased substantially since the start of the crisis, especially in countries impacted most severely by the virus.¹² Science is the best example that multilateralism benefits every citizen.

By creating global institutions such as the International Science Council or the International Network for Government Science Advice, the scientific community has established the mechanisms necessary to respond to global calls for action. In addition, there are multiple examples from CERN to SESAME, from JRC to IIASA, demonstrating that science can play a key role in building trust between nations and tackle global challenges through multilateral cooperation. In fact, science can only flourish in a multilateral environment, therefore it is in the own interest of science to defend multilateral institutions.

On February 17, 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted the “Joint Communication on strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism,” which demands that the EU should leverage its role as a global powerhouse in research and innovation to ensure that multilateral action is informed by the best possible scientific evidence.¹³ Moreover, the communication specifically asks for “non-traditional coalitions and formats” such as multi-stakeholder partnerships between governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, and the scientific community with the aim of shaping an inclusive multilateralism and acting as a catalyst for reform.¹⁴

Therefore, science for multilateralism does not mean that science should help preserving the current system of multilateral governance, which certainly has its flaws. The UN system, in particular, still reflects after seventy-five years in many ways a post-World War II reality that has long been superseded. On the contrary, if multilateralism is to survive and thrive, international organizations and conventions must be reformed to be able to cope with the systemic challenges of the 21st century. This will require ambitious political action, but also an enormous amount of scientific advice across the board.

COVID-19 provides a perfect example of the kind of systemic challenges humankind will face in the decades to come. We should use the opportunity to learn the lessons. One of these lessons is that global challenges can only be addressed through cooperation across borders, whether national, institutional, or disciplinary. We need to overcome nationalist reflexes, which still have been very common throughout the pandemic.

Therefore, scientists need to team up with the people in charge of leading international negotiations and designing multilateral structures: diplomats. As Gluckman and Turekian (2020) rightly point out,¹⁵ this will require global scientific organizations and individual scientists to recognize that their contribution to society is more than just building knowledge. But it also means that diplomats will need to learn to engage with scientists in ways they never imagined. Possible solutions range from fellowships in the respective other camp to the broadening of the evidence base for foreign policies to the strengthening of science in embassies and delegations, not just the major ones.

The building of a new multilateral order fit for the future requires the skills of both, scientists and diplomats, and science diplomacy is the way to connect them. For this to happen, both sides will need to get out of their respective comfort zones. COVID-19 may just have provided the necessary spark. **SD**

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European External Action Service.

Endnotes

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