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OPINION

Science Diplomacy as a powerful tool for national unity and friendship among nations – III

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(Second part of this article appeared yesterday (06 Feb. 2024))



Issues and challenges for institutionalizing SD and metrics for success





Science diplomacy has attracted remarkable attention in public and foreign policy and academic research in the past 15 years in the developed economies. However, this concept is still plagued by a huge talk–action discrepancy in many of those countries. It is a relatively new subject in many countries in the Global South, including Sri Lanka. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any discourse on SD either in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or in the Ministry dealing with S&T in Sri Lanka. Though it has a great relevance and importance in a turbulent, tumultuous and fractured globalised world rife with manifold issues, challenges and conflicts as enumerated before, SD is still at an incipient stage in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is opportune to initiate a discourse on this subject at national level with a view to institutionalising it. Some challenges and constraints encountered in this regard are given below:

Though S&T is the prime driver of and key to development, it is still a low priority in the country receiving only about 0.1% of the GDP, which is even below that of Nepal (0.3%).

Low number of R&D personnel in the country which is only about 106 per million of the population as opposed to Israel (8250), Korea (7980), Singapore (6803), Japan (5331), Malaysia (2397), Pakistan (336) and India (253).

Dearth of S&T personnel among the cabinet ministers and secretaries to the ministries (only about 10 -12%) which is much less among senior administrative staff in the ministries and state institutions

Lack of rapport and cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry responsible for S&T and the absence of a science attaché in the foreign mission of Sri Lanka.

Lack of integration of the scientific and foreign policy communities into a cohesive nexus

Absence of a dedicated in-house scientific advisory mechanism and a Chief Science Advisor (CSA) who can link the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA)

Limited dialogue between policy makers, academics and researchers working in the realm of foreign policy

Imposition of new rules and regulations causing inordinate delays on international scientific cooperation and collaboration

Therefore, it is imperative to address the above as a matter of utmost importance and urgency given the momentous role Sri Lanka has to play as the Chairman of the IORA from 2023 to 2025 and the geo-political and geo-economic significance of the Indian Ocean which has become a cynosure in world politics with super powers already viewing it through their own geo-strategic lenses.

Way forward

Today we are living in a complex, multipolar world rife with geopolitical rivalries and undercurrents where national security goes beyond the physical securing of one's own borders. Moreover, in this era of internet and cyberspace, the actual location of individuals hardly matters as ideas and ideologies travel at the click of a mouse beyond borders on a real time basis. Swami Vivekananda described the world as a “gymnasium” where nations come to make themselves strong. It is against this backdrop that the world must come to grips with a myriad

of formidable challenges and threats such as climate change, poverty, disaster vulnerability, glaring inequalities, food, water, energy and cyber insecurity and pollution, to name a few. They are complex, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, and demand an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, multi-sectoral and transnational systems approach where cooperation between specialists with diverse backgrounds in both the natural and social sciences across territorial boundaries and community engagement are imperative.

In this context, SD has a great relevance and value in view of its profound unifying, bonding, and healing power and its ability to transcend cultural, national and religious boundaries – for science, as we know, provides a neutral environment for the free and friendly exchange of ideas between people. It could also be a powerful and effective tool in addressing complex and intractable issues such as poaching in Sri Lankan waters by fishermen from a neighboring country, debt restructuring, and promoting foreign direct investment and international trade.

However, this formidable tool still remains untapped and underexploited for fostering social cohesion and ethnic harmony in our country, promoting international relations, mitigating regional and global conflicts and addressing SDGs. In order for SD to be credible, acceptable and effective, it has to be combined with morality and ethics and should be free from political interference. Here, it is important to cultivate a climate in which subjects will not be influenced by extraneous considerations such as military prowess, economic might or the size of the country, but instead will act on merit and substance in an objective and dispassionate manner free from prejudices, biases and preconceived notions.

Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean which has outstanding geo-political and geo-economic interests. Alfred Thayer Mahan, an Admiral in the US Navy, said in 1897, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters”. The Indian Ocean which has become a cynosure in world politics and the super powers already viewing it through their own geo-strategic lenses. It is under such circumstances that Sri Lanka serves as the Chairman of the IORA from 2023 to 2025 and also as a member of the SAARC and BIMSTEC

In Sri Lanka, there are several challenges to and constraints on institutionalizing SD, including the low national priority given to S&T, dearth of scientists conversant with SD, lack of discourse between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry dealing with S&T. Therefore, addressing the constraints and limitations on institutionalizing SD and creating a vibrant framework for systematic use of science diplomacy constitute high-priority concerns in Sri Lanka at this crucial juncture. Their urgent necessity cannot be overemphasised. Sri Lanka’s diplomacy needs to rise to challenges and to demonstrate great strength so as to navigate the complexities and intricacies involved in the region while also safeguarding her sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Sri Lanka has produced several outstanding sons of global repute such as Dr. Lakshman Kadirgamar, Shirley Amarasinghe, Dr. Neville Kanakarathne and Dr. Jayantha Dhanapala, etc., who have made an indelible impression in the arena of international relations. There are still able and competent Sri Lankans at home and abroad with a commendable grasp of intricacies involved in international relations in a multipolar world. They need to be identified and mobilized to complement the national endeavours, discourses and deliberations in the realm of international relations through SD. Sri Lanka can make diplomatic gains in any forum that