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Science and Public Diplomacy – Two Solitudes? [1]

Lately I have been thinking and writing about the relationship between science, technology, diplomacy and international policy. I covered these issues in my new book, but because I will be teaching a course on this stuff at the University of Toronto in January, I have been updating my research and trying to push the analysis a bit.

I have often made the case that although a diplomatic renaissance is long overdue, the fundamental reform of diplomacy's major institutions (the foreign ministry and foreign service) and practices (traditional, state-centric representation) is an absolute prerequisite. This in turn will implicate a more fundamental diplomatic transition: from looking to seeing, from hearing to listening, and from diktat to dialogue.

These happen to be the touchstones of PD.

Where, though, to start the revolution? I can think of no better place than at the intersection of science, technology and international policy. That is a strategic nexus where a transformational brand of public diplomacy - one which is powered by continuous learning and can tap into the global political economy of knowledge in order to solve problems non-violently - could make all the difference. After all, the capacity to generate, absorb and use S&T plays a crucial role in international relations, not least by improving development prospects and addressing the needs of the poor. Poverty reduction contributes to development, and development is the flip side of security.

And yet, and yet…S&T is alien to most foreign service officers, is almost completely absent from the mainstream international policy mix, and is nearly invisible within foreign ministries. Yes, the State Department has its admirable Jefferson Fellows internship program, and the Foreign Office in the UK has established a Science and Innovation Network, but the exceptions should not be confused with the rule. Most foreign ministries lack the basic scientific and technological knowledge and expertise, and are just not culturally sensitive or attuned to S&T.

This leaves the world in a rather precarious and exposed position. I have argued elsewhere that the militarization of international policy has proven an unmitigated disaster - precision munitions can't help much with increasing crop yields; legionnaires are not very concerned with diminishing biodiversity or species extinction. Nor are international S&T issues much like the familiar suite of political, economic and ideational differences to which many serving diplomats have become accustomed. Those files are by nature highly subjective and dependent upon perception - where you stand depends in large part upon where you sit.

Scientific and technological matters, on the other hand, are dependent upon objective experimentation and verification, thus making them different in kind. That may help to explain

why the institutions of international policy have had such difficulty adapting.
In any case, there is enormous scope for more creative thinking about the nature of the basic linkages between science and PD.

What I am not seeing is much evidence that this is actually happening.