

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Considering Water Diplomacy ^[1]

SINGAPORE – Uneasy about relying on water imported from Malaysia and determined to sustain its booming growth, Singapore devotes much effort to innovative water planning. The Singapore River has become a giant reservoir, rainstorm runoff is carefully collected, used water is treated and recycled, and the island nation's five million residents are expected to be stingy in their water consumption.

A world leader in maximizing water assets, Singapore willingly shares its expertise. An intellectual hub for these efforts is the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, where the Institute for Water Policy recently celebrated its second anniversary. The institute's director, Professor Seetharam Kallidaikurichi, has set forth an ambitious agenda, which includes studies of water governance, evaluations of global water quality, and recommendations about best practices in water management.

The vitality and seriousness with which the institute addresses such issues is a reminder that water-related assistance is an underused tool of public diplomacy. Rather than an "advertising" approach to public diplomacy ("We are wonderful! Love us!"), water diplomacy answers a crucial question often asked by recipients of public diplomacy efforts but just as often ignored by public diplomacy planners: "What can you do for us?"

Throughout the world, few things are more precious than a safe and abundant water supply. A country that can help another nation improve the availability and quality of water is likely to win friends, regardless of how the respective governments get along. Water diplomacy is an excellent tool for the United States to use in improving relations with Syria, which is enduring a prolonged drought, and other countries where the public has been indifferent or even hostile toward American interests, but would welcome water-related assistance.

Public diplomacy does not need to be a unilateral enterprise. Engaging in water diplomacy offers the United States an opportunity to develop international partnerships for creating and delivering public diplomacy programs. A U.S.-Singapore joint venture in this field would enhance both countries' credentials as leaders in improving lives throughout the world, and for the United States it would be an improvement on the go-it-alone approach that characterizes much of its foreign policy. Private sector participation by foundations and corporations should be another facet of such partnerships, and could include funding for research into ways to combat water-borne diseases.

Developing the concept of water diplomacy requires an essential, but often neglected, element of public diplomacy: imagination. Too much public diplomacy today has become a process of simply going through the motions in overblown public relations campaigns that misjudge the needs and underestimate the sophistication of global publics. Actually improving people's lives is given short shrift, and as a result public diplomacy fails to reach its potential as a means of advancing national interests.
