Soft Power and Knowledge Diplomacy: Let’s Swing for the Fences

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Power derby between hard power and soft power has peppered international relations between countries for decades leaving them with some unfathomable choices and consequences leading the nation states to wonder which ‘jockey’ to bet on. Hard power has been rather musty lately given all the permutations and combinations coiled in it, allowing soft power to segue into the foray globally. Given the infatuation with soft power, the countries can successfully work towards resolving some of the world’s most pressing problems. Climate change, food security, biodiversity knows no boundaries. This is where international higher education comes into picture. The time is ripe for the international higher education, collaborative research and innovation to realize its full potential and contribute largely towards making the world a better place to live in. Social innovation holds the key and institutions of higher education leads the way to make a global change.

‘Knowledge Diplomacy’ – the amalgamation of international higher education, research and innovation that helps in building and nourishing the international relations in an increasingly interconnected world – has the capacity to be the catalyst in bringing visible change and creating a social impact. It has been used as a tool for extending a state’s soft power, but now this form of diplomacy can be applied to cater to global issues as well. Orthodox forms of diplomacy seem to be the old cliché and may not be useful in every domain of international politics. Internationalization of education and collaborative research may prove to be the bridge between countries even in a turbulent political atmosphere. These are times when many nation states are looking inward and becoming increasingly protectionist. The new approach provided by ‘knowledge diplomacy’ may be considered beneficial in fostering international relations as well.

The traditional viewpoint of international higher education which includes student mobility, student exchange programs, etc. have been at the forefront but certain new elements such as international joint
universities and knowledge clusters are gaining momentum. Collaboration in the field of knowledge diplomacy is proving to be a successful approach. Knowledge diplomacy comprises of diverse stakeholders involved in collaborative research, innovation and unique teaching and learning processes. The internationalization of education has provided a platform for colleges and universities to connect globally which in turn might be quite useful in dealing with a host of global challenges.

International higher education has the inherent capacity to build upon knowledge diplomacy. The network between universities and research institutions can work wonders where nation states can join hands and each country can contribute differently, deriving the benefits equally. Global summits held annually can include knowledge diplomacy in their agenda and jump-start the multilateral framework. It can also prove to be useful in achieving UN’s Sustainable Development Goals to a great extent. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)-Climate Change established by the United Nations in 2012 to mobilize global scientific and technological expertise to promote pragmatic solutions for sustainable development, in the area of climate change has proved to be a success.

Cooperation and not competition can fill the gap in the knowledge sharing domain. In the near future, this form of inclusive soft power would have different offerings for the world than what its traditional elements have to offer today. The ‘international’ would always debate the pros and cons of knowledge diplomacy but the actors involved needs to realize the fact that the world needs to work in tandem and higher education can provide the impetus to achieve the unachievable. As more and more universities engage with each other, their achievements would indeed put wind in the sails to achieve the desired goals.

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