

Press conference and press review

Press conference

Presentation of the 2021 GESDA Summit and the Science Breakthrough Radar®

Moderated by:

Marieke Hood, Executive Director Corporate Affairs, GESDA, France

With:

Patrick Aebischer, President Emeritus, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL); Vice-Chairman GESDA, Switzerland

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, Chairman, GESDA Board of Directors, Austria

Chorh Chuan Tan, Chief Health Scientist at the Ministry of Health of Singapore; Board Member, GESDA, Singapore

Nanjira Sambuli, Policy Analyst, Advocacy Strategist; Board Member, Digital Impact Alliance, Development Gateway and The New Humanitarian, Kenya; Member GESDA Diplomacy Forum

It was a moment two years in the making. GESDA Chairman Peter Brabeck-Letmathe took the microphone to welcome the dozens of journalists who were participating in a news conference that was conducted both in person and online. The news conference marked the start of the inaugural Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipation Summit. “It is a first outing of our newly created foundation,” he said. Brabeck-Letmathe and Vice-Chairman Patrick Aebischer, flanked by other GESDA board members, staff, and participants, called the news conference to introduce GESDA’s Science Breakthrough Radar® for identifying scientific advances that will impact humanity within five, ten and 25 years, as well as the Summit, which provided a platform for discussing the Radar’s findings and collectively figuring out how best to respond and act. “The Radar is an open and free accessible digital platform, to facilitate conversations and interactions with all interested parties,” underlined Nanjira Sambuli, a policy analyst from Kenya who is also Diplomacy Moderator at GESDA.

GESDA board member Chorh Chuan Tan, who is the Chief scientist at the Ministry of health in Singapore, said he found “the GESDA approach exciting,

because it is systematic – and this is needed, because we are dealing with highly complicated problems – yet it is also inclusive and global. Finally, this initiative is open, acknowledging different perspectives, but also structured. What we do hope is to accelerate the science advancement over the many valleys that may hinder its development, and particularly towards a better access to the benefits it can bring to communities all around the world”.

Taken together, these two offerings – the Radar and the Summit – drew a lot of interest from the Swiss and international press.



During the question-and-answer part of the hourlong news conference, Jamey Keaten of The Associated Press in Geneva asked whether GESDA had the logistical capacity to carry out its mission since it had only a small staff to deliver on some “very, very big ideas, very big projects” and “big futuristic ambitions”. He also asked what lessons GESDA might have learned from the failure of the World Health Organization and others to prevent the glaring vaccine inequities among nations that have become a major theme of the COVID-19 pandemic. GESDA has been managing for the past two years with a nine-member board of directors, three leaders for its academic and diplomatic forums, an executive team of eight employees and several other contractual hires. Aebischer, former head of EPFL, replied that the Radar will always be at the heart of GESDA’s functions “because that is the raw material to discuss”, and this will always be carried out by a broad community of scientists rather than by reliance on a small, core staff. “You know, I am amazed to see that to build this, that we had 500 top leading scientists engaging their time to do this.

This is quite remarkable. The work of science does not work necessarily like some other part of society which is primarily motivated by financial return. It is really by sharing data, by peer recognition, by wanting to contribute,” Aebischer told reporters. “The idea is to get the data we need from the scientists.”

Addressing a question on the pandemic, Jeremy Farrar, who directs the Wellcome Trust, and who is another GESDA board member who was in the room, expertly summarized GESDA’s reason for being. He said “scientists did not think through the consequences of the problems that would come down the track in terms of inequality” from a pandemic despite making enormous progress on the scientific front by developing coronavirus vaccines in record time. “If you do not put that in the context of society, if you do not put that in the context of politics – and you cannot avoid politics and diplomacy – then scientific advances will increasingly be available to a small elite in the world and not to everybody. And to me that is the greatest challenge of the 21st century: How do we avoid that degree of inequity in the world, whether we’re talking about climate inequity, whether we’re talking about inequity in terms of energy access, water access, access to science and technology?” Farrar asked.

“And if we are not careful, there will be a small group of countries or individuals in the world with access to the best science, and it will not be accessible to everyone else,” he continued. “And unless that is addressed politically and diplomatically, we will not make the advances that humanity needs and obviously we have only got a small planet. And the second is there is, I think, an increasing distance maybe driving the advances in populism globally, which is putting a distance between society, politics, and scientific advances. And if we don’t bridge that, then I think we will end up in a very inequitable world. And inequitable worlds are very tense worlds, and ultimately in history have mostly led to conflict.”

Laurent Sierro of the Swiss News Agency *Keystone-SDA/ATS* in Geneva asked what GESDA hopes to achieve in the same timeframes the Radar uses – five, ten and 25 years – and whether anyone at GESDA could envision having a “fully AI” board member, as in a robot driven entirely by artificial intelligence, a quarter century from now? GESDA board members smiled at the question and did not answer. Sierro also wondered how had the “P5” countries – Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States, all permanent, veto-wielding members of the 15-nation *United Nations Security Council*, the world body’s most powerful arm – reacted to GESDA? Rather than discuss the complexity of the frequently deadlocked Security Council’s reactions and global politics, Brabeck-Letmathe used to occasion to recalibrate expectations of what GESDA could become if Swiss authorities agree to extend its mandate, and to emphasize that its role is to serve as an honest broker of science-backed information,

remaining neutral and objective as it gathers ideas through broad consultations.

“There was this question about how can you pretend with 20 people or 30 people to achieve what you want to achieve, which is a global challenge, which has not been tackled up to now?” he began. “The 20 or 30 people are not the ones who are doing the work. The work is being done on a voluntary basis by thousands. Thousands of scientists and thousands of diplomats in the world all over,” Brabeck-Letmathe began. “We still need to get the agreement from our founders for the next five and ten years,” he continued. “For the next five and ten years, voluntarily and on purpose, I think GESDA should not become much more than what it is. Because we will not be able to incentivize all these thousands of people, all over the world, which we need, if they feel that what we are doing is not exclusively for them, and for their cause, but it’s for an institution, or for a company or for a government. I think the biggest challenge that GESDA has is to keep the enthusiasm of all participants all over the world to participate in this challenge, which it has as an objective, like it was said by Jeremy Farrar. The objective is that we make these scientific breakthroughs available to everyone in this world.”

Press Review

Swiss and international press coverage of the 2021 GESDA Summit and the Science Breakthrough Radar®

The strong interest and curiosity about GESDA that journalists showed at the press conference and throughout the rest of the Summit translated into very positive and global news coverage: more than 500 articles, video broadcasts and podcasts on GESDA appeared in the two weeks leading up to and including the Summit, reaching an estimated 800 million people – one-in-ten worldwide – according to *Adwired* of Zurich, the agency mandated to accomplish that press screening. Most stories were published in English or in three of Switzerland’s national languages: French, German and Italian. Stories were also published in Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. They appeared in 33 countries but were concentrated in two nations: 54 per cent in the U.S., 21 per cent in Switzerland. The rest were mainly in Britain, Canada, India, Germany, Singapore, Austria, Italy, Hong Kong, Swaziland, and France, but the remaining countries also spanned Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

Reporters closely followed three days of intense discussions among leading experts in the fields targeted by GESDA. The news coverage brought the concept of science diplomacy, and GESDA’s brand of

anticipatory science diplomacy, to the forefront, with most news articles corroborating the need for more anticipation of the many complex breakthroughs occurring at a dizzying pace. The reports also reflected a fascination with the prospect of GESDA, as a new foundation strengthening Geneva as a preeminent hub of multilateralism. Some raised the questions of whether its mandate would be renewed and be provided with enough public and private funding to scale up sufficiently to accomplish its lofty goals.

“GESDA, the quantum leap needed for International Geneva”, proclaimed an editorial in *Le Temps* of Geneva, which called the new foundation “undoubtedly the best thing that has happened to international Geneva in years” and urged the Swiss and Geneva governments to renew GESDA’s mandate beyond its three-year startup phase, which comes to an end in 2022. “Ultimately its purpose is not simply for Geneva but for all of humanity,” wrote Stéphane Bussard, who also authored other articles strongly supportive of GESDA’s ambition of accelerating concrete action. “It has been a long time since international Geneva has seen such an ambitious initiative,” he observed in one article. “The most crucial and difficult phase will be to translate innovations identified by the Radar into concrete and useful solutions to face the big challenges ahead.” Bussard also prominently covered former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta’s high-profile address during the Summit, where he described anticipatory science diplomacy as a paradigm-shifting tool. “GESDA is, in this sense, an intelligent initiative that brings together science and diplomacy. For Geneva, this is a huge opportunity,” he said. “The cost of not anticipating is enormous. This is why we need to create anticipation mechanisms that allow politicians and scientists to talk to each other. GESDA is an example of this.”

Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis, along with Brabeck-Letmathe, established the themes many Swiss and international reporters emphasized. Cassis and Brabeck-Letmathe warned that dangerous geopolitical fault lines could emerge if powerful new uses for science and technology are concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy countries or multinational businesses. In a pre-recorded video message played at the news conference and later for participants at the start of the Summit, Cassis spoke of “a growing feeling that a new Cold War is about to be fought over science and technology, and the power they confer to the states that master them”. Brabeck-Letmathe cautioned against “neocolonialism”, saying GESDA’s mission is to help spread the benefits of science and technology equitably around the globe. The “highlights” of the international coverage were articles by outlets such as *The Associated Press*, *Newsweek* and *Bloomberg* that collectively reach billions of readers, *Adwired* reported. The *AP* article was headlined: “Swiss-Backed Project Aims to Avert

New ‘Cold War’ in Science”. *Newsweek* carried a similar headline: “Biden Administration Shows Interest in Swiss Project Aimed at Preventing ‘New Cold War’”. Stories by *Keystone-SDA/ATS* were widely carried by news outlets with headlines such as: “GESDA: Switzerland wants to avoid a cold war over science”.

Other prominent, globally distributed articles about GESDA’s partnership with XPRIZE and planned quantum competition were published by *Axios* and *CQ Roll Call*, which is published on *Westlaw Today* and *Reuters*. At almost 800 words, the *CQ Roll Call* piece was relatively long in length; it had lengthy quotes from Brabeck-Letmathe and Amir Banifatemi, executive director of XPRIZE Europe, and took care to explain GESDA’s mission. “While it may be decades before quantum technologies become real world applications, GESDA officials said there is a need to prepare for future disruption it might cause,” the article said. “This is part of the Swiss foundation’s mission to anticipate scientific breakthroughs and combine science with diplomacy to get better results.”

Among 509 news articles about the Summit – most of them published by U.S.- and Swiss-based wire services – 455 had a positive tone, 46 were neutral and eight were controversial in nature by raising questions such as GESDA’s long-term sustainability and relevance. Sixty per cent were about GESDA averting a new Cold War over science; 22 per cent focused on the Summit itself; and 8 per cent dealt mainly with the Radar. The other 10 per cent were written about Nobel Prize-winning Swiss astrophysicist Didier Queloz’s observations, Brabeck-Letmathe’s interviews, advances in neurotechnology, science diplomacy, and the GESDA-XPRIZE collaboration.

The *Keystone-SDA/ATS* interview with Queloz, in French, emphasized his call for scientists, diplomats, citizens, and businesspeople to work more closely together because “science has lost contact with society”, and cited as an example the two-fifths of the Swiss population that preferred not to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Brabeck-Letmathe’s question-and-answer piece in *Blick*, Switzerland’s dominant German-language tabloid, offered concrete, easy-to-understand examples of why GESDA’s anticipatory science diplomacy could be a powerful long-range tool. “The Internet was invented in Geneva and is now the basis of business for the three largest corporations in the world,” he told the tabloid. “Only today do politicians realize that they should have regulated the whole thing so that nobody becomes so dominant. With GESDA you could have seen it coming.”

An article by *Swissinfo*’s Dorian Burkhalter concluded that “civil society and private actors remained underrepresented at the Summit. This was recognized by Aebischer during a session in which he said GESDA hoped to involve more private companies

next year. This is particularly relevant for discussions about AI research in which private firms, not countries, have the lead. In the meantime, the Radar offers everyone the possibility of submitting a contribution that could inform GESDA’s work in the future”. One week before the Summit, an “analysis” published by the English-language *Geneva Observer* website raised some critical points. It quoted unidentified sources attacking Brabeck-Letmathe and Aebischer as “outsiders” with “no knowledge of International Geneva”, a perception that for months “slowed down the onboarding of some local stakeholders” but was overcome through no small amount of “fence-mending” and “traditional diplomacy”. Brabeck-Letmathe, however, was quoted as saying he was not surprised at a certain lack of understanding because the Summit marked the first time GESDA “really goes public”.



By contrast, most stories offered compelling evidence that GESDA is welcome news for multilateralism, and that it could make a positive difference on the world stage if its mandate is extended beyond next year.

A quote in the *Geneva Observer* article underlines this: Professor Paul Arthur Berkman, Associated Fellow of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and 2021 Fulbright Arctic Chair awarded by the United States Department of State with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said he believes Switzerland should be lauded for such efforts. “Science diplomacy is a language of hope,” he says. “There is far too much doom and gloom in the world, that is polarized and paralyzed largely because of short-term thinking. The challenge we have right now is to recognize that short-term thinking is related to self-interests. The primary responsibility of science diplomats is to build common interests, which means operating short-to-long term across a continuum of urgencies.”

The AP’s Jamey Keaten also noted GESDA’s relevance. “While conceived in 2019, GESDA has started to look prescient during the COVID-19 pandemic that caught many governments off guard, drew an uncertain or unclear response by health policy makers like the Geneva-based World Health Organization, and has exposed gaping inequality

between the rich countries that have wide access to vaccines—and poor countries that don’t,” wrote Keaten, who quoted one of the Opening Plenary’s prominent panellists, Alondra Nelson, Deputy Director for science and Society of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, telling the Summit that GESDA and its anticipatory approach offer “a fantastic possibility” for innovation and partnership.

In another article by *Swissinfo*, the reporters expressed being pleasantly surprised by the Summit. “As I walked through the door of the Biotech Campus in Geneva, I still had in mind Greta Thunberg’s recent speech in Milan, in which she criticized the ‘blah blah blah’ of world leaders who, faced with the climate crisis, discuss, and promise lots and lots, but never act. The suspicion that I was facing three days of ‘blah blah blah’ was strong,” journalist Zeno Zoccatelli wrote. “And I was not the only one, it seems. Invited to speak at the summit’s opening conference, South Africa’s Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor concluded a long series of speeches by saying: ‘But now these words must become deeds.’ Will it happen? It is still too early to say, but I certainly came out of the summit less pessimistic than I was going in. One of the reasons is the GESDA Science Breakthrough Radar®, created by the Foundation with the collaboration of hundreds of scientists around the world.”

Dorian Burkhalter wrote that the idea behind GESDA’s mission of using the future to build the present may not be entirely new, since science fiction has long encouraged people to consider a variety of futures. Yet GESDA brings something valuable, according to him, when raising the question of whether international organizations and global governance systems can address the world’s most pressing challenges a quarter century from now: “The creation of a platform specifically designed to address this question is a welcome addition to Geneva’s rich ecosystem.”

More information

[Press conference recording on YouTube](#)

[Twitter Moments related to the summit](#)