City Diplomacy: Another Generational Shift?

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Abstract

City diplomacy has a long history and has witnessed a clear sprawl over the last century. Successive "generations" of city diplomacy approaches have emerged over this period, with a heyday of networked urban governance in the last two decades. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis presents a key opportunity to contemplate the direction of city diplomacy amid global systemic disruptions, raising questions about the effectiveness of differing diplomatic styles across cities but also the prospect of a new generational shift. This essay traces the history of generations in city diplomacy, examines prospects for novel ways of understanding city diplomacy, and contemplates how the pandemic's impact heralds not the demise of internationalization in urban governance but an era in which city diplomacy is even more crucial amid fundamental limitations.

Keywords: city diplomacy, Covid-19, urban governance

Introduction

With historical roots dating back centuries, modern city diplomacy has undergone a number of generational shifts throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. From bilateralism and twinning to urban networks and club-diplomacy models, city diplomacy has exhibited steady evolution in both practice and scholarship. By the end of the 2010s, scholars and practitioners were reflecting on how the proliferation of city diplomacy efforts reflected or departed from historical trajectory.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented further opportunities to contemplate the direction of city diplomacy amid global systemic disruption, raising questions about the effectiveness of differing diplomatic styles across regions and cities and about the prospect of a new generational shift. This essay reviews this prospective generational shift and its relevance to challenges posed by complex global problems.

That cities are the fulcrum of global society is a well-worn narrative in academic, policy, and media discourses. Accelerating urbanization has been proclaimed by scholars, international organizations, and private sector actors as the defining human force of the 21st century. The impacts of climate change and natural disasters on human settlements, along with the social and economic impacts of Covid-19, exhibit the relevance of cities in managing global crises and in undertaking related collaborations. However, cities continue to lack full legitimacy as global actors[1] while the notion of city diplomacy remains an academic niche.

Evidence of the global role of cities is abundant in practice, including hundreds of city networks,[2] thousands of acknowledgements (and growing) in multilateral programs and declarations, and the continuing internationalization of mayoral activities.[3] Reflecting prescient observations in the early 1990s, city halls are now very much "going abroad."[4] Embracing a context largely ignored by 20th century international relations (IR) scholarship, a new generation of scholars within and beyond IR has found a fertile topic in the international activities of cities. At the same time, the purpose and meaning of city diplomacy has itself evolved beyond common issues like sustainability and cultural exchange to include numerous urban policy challenges like migration, public health, socio-economic inequality, and others.

Understanding city diplomacy can help scholars better study the evolution of politics and policy at local and global levels, but requires better appreciation of the various generations of thought on the topic. The emergent scholarly domain of global urban governance offers opportunities to highlight the value of city diplomacy. Using this perspective, this essay traces the history of generations in city diplomacy, examines prospects for novel ways of understanding city diplomacy, and contemplates how disruption from the Covid-19 pandemic heralds not the demise of internationalization in urban governance and city diplomacy but an era in which both are even more crucial for meeting global policy visions.

Generations of City Diplomacy

City diplomacy is no novelty and has roots preceding the nation-state system and dominance of Westphalian logic in global politics.[5] This point challenges claims to exceptionalism and historical novelty made in prior generations of city diplomacy scholarship. A deep historical legacy enables discussions about city diplomacy on three bases: (i) city representatives act internationally on behalf of local political constituencies; (ii) this action enlists embassies, envoys, and heads of local government; and (iii) it encompasses mediation with third party actors.[6] The history of how municipal governments act internationally, and how IR scholars understand such actions, reflects various generations – from cultural exchange and bilateral city-to-city relationships to complex mechanisms and circuits for international coalition-building and policy diffusion.[7] Generational understandings of city diplomacy, as discussed below, reflect

trends of intellectual insights, but also incorporate generational changes in practice by cities themselves. Where there are inconsistencies between the two, they appeared typically in cases where scholarly uptake lagged shifts in practice at their early stages.

The first modern generation of city diplomacy, emerging in the early 20th century, was based on bilateral relationships. Known generally as twinning, this approach was in many cases opportunistic, idiosyncratic, and centered on cultural, economic, or humanitarian purposes.[8] While widespread in practice, city diplomacy during this early era received little attention from scholarship. Geographers and historians recognized these trends more proactively than did researchers of IR and diplomacy. Additionally, scholarly advancement was stunted by limited theorization about the mechanisms by which city diplomacy functioned and influenced global politics at the dawn of the post-WWII international order. Focusing on issues like cultural exchange, diaspora relations, and commercial market development, city diplomacy at this time often reflected the individual aspirations of political and commercial leaders but still contributed to shifts in local and transnational policy agendas.[9]

These early actions laid a foundation for the more systematic, coherent, and institutionalized practice of city diplomacy. By the mid-20th century, and especially amid post-WWII recovery, city diplomacy established the foundation for collectively organized forms of city cooperation. Initial changes manifested themselves in the scaling-up of twinning activities, with the establishment of programs like the Sister Cities International network (founded in 1956). City diplomacy in this era began to embrace multi-lateral opportunities in a global setting characterized by the emergence of international communities of practice. City networks provided forums not only for exchanging ideas and facilitating commerce but also for acting collectively on certain policy issues, as coalitions advocated for local interests in the global policy arena.

With parallels to the Hanseatic League, urban multilateralism had a precedent. For example, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) was founded in 1913 to promote city interests within the League of Nations. The mid-20th century saw a variety of similar initiatives, and some IR scholars took notice.[10] During and immediately following the 1970s era of federalism, when subnational governments were granted broader policy autonomy, the concept of paradiplomacy[11] emerged to describe diplomatic efforts that paralleled those of traditional national actors. Despite remaining a relatively niche scholarly topic even to the present, subnational diplomacy has steadily gained popularity among lower-level governments (e.g., provinces, regions, and cities).[12]

The late years of the Cold War and the early 1990s witnessed a mix of first-generation forms of city diplomacy (e.g., Mayors for Peace in 1982, a global campaign to promote military disarmament). This era also saw the emergence of novel forms of city networking that relied not only on city-to-city exchange but also on institutionalized secretariats that facilitated collaborations and sharing of resources and knowledge;[13] an example is ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), founded in 1990 to help governments pursue sustainability practices. At the same time, UN agencies – including UNESCO for culture, UN-Habitat for urban settlements, and the World Health Organization for public health – embarked on similar network-based efforts, further prompting the transformation of city diplomacy from incidental or symbolic twinning to practical diplomatic engagement for thousands of local governments.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, as these city institutionalized secretariats expanded their membership bases, a growing cohort of scholars emerged focusing on these transnational municipal activities and their impact on international affairs. Based primarily on geography and environmental studies in Europe while reflecting the earlier generation of paradiplomacy research in IR, scholarship of transnational municipal networks focused on what ultimately became known as city networks – the latest generational shift in city diplomacy research and practice.[14] This scholarship established the foundation for not only an emerging cohort of researchers of city diplomacy[15] but also the expansion of related research by IR scholars in Asia and Latin America.[16]

Recent scholarship has offered useful theorizations of the normative processes at play in city diplomacy, through the perspective of the most recent generation of study and practice.[17] The popularity of some city networks – C40 and ICLEI in primis but also the experiment of the 100 Resilient Cities initiative – generated interest across scholarship in geography, environmental studies, public policy and administration and subsequently IR.[18] Critical discussions about power and agency in city networks have interrogated the political economy as a defining context, the ways in which networks themselves become actors in city diplomacy beyond the actions of member cities, and how global urban governance is precipitating the internationalization of urban governance.[19] Debates about city diplomacy have also engaged with theories about international law[20] and with mainstream IR scholarship, heeding calls to observe city diplomacy in the context of transformations to the international system.[21]

Finally, the current reality of city diplomacy is also productively observed through a strand of IR scholarship that is conversant in both international theory and urban studies, articulating the interplay between classical IR questions and the emerging political geography of city diplomacy.[22] This perspective is essential because it broadens horizons for discussions in diplomacy studies about cities and for interdisciplinary discussions that can spawn new generations of city diplomacy scholarship and practice.

From City Networks to Global Urban Governance

The new millennium has so far seen the expansion and diversification of city diplomacy, leading to specialized and purpose-built networks that intertwine policy action with private and philanthropic interests. Relatedly, this trend marks a generational shift in which city diplomacy engages global policy agendas like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The activities of networks like UCLG, ICLEI, and C40, along with the growing visibility of mayors on the global stage, animates a narrative that challenges the traditional nation-centered international system (embodied by ideas that "states talk and cities act," mayors "rule the world," and cities can "save the planet"). Indeed, the failures of states and other traditional IR actors to solve global problems invites such narrative iconoclasm.[23]

Nevertheless, as many scholars of global governance argue, the international realm is neither a zero-sum game nor a context in which actors can be easily disentangled. Rather, the urban presence in global diplomacy should be understood as a natural consequence of global and local problems that blend over time; the former are manifest in the latter, making global problems

urban problems. Additionally, multilateral actors and processes play an important role in magnifying urban issues as matters of global concern and generating opportunities for cities to engage in non-local policy discussions.

With the growth of global city networks have come inter-network and intra-network politics. Some networks were created as or evolved into exclusive clubs for cities of particular political, diplomatic, or economic status, while other networks have acted as open and accessible coalitions that involve cities having various contexts and policy challenges. The current generation of city diplomacy reflects not only the well-understood dynamics of club and network diplomacy[24] but also a growing fragmentation that leads to competition and collaborative gridlock. Additionally, given the vast array of networking opportunities, resource-constrained cities are faced with difficult decisions about which networks to engage.[25]

The aforementioned circumstances are leading to what can be labelled "global urban governance" – a realm of international action conducted by cities and affecting cities that transcends the legacy institutions and practices of traditional city diplomacy. There is again no particular novelty about this trend, as cities have historically been politically, economically, and culturally interlinked.[26] Distinguishing the current context from the 20th century's state-centric geopolitics, however, is the growing power and influence of cities within their nations and on the global stage – and, as importantly, the recognition of this influence by international and diplomatic agencies. Cities and urban issues account for at least 1,246 acknowledgments in the 32 UN frameworks emerging since 1972.[27] Additionally, many cities now see a mandate for action in some of the global policy domains neglected or de-prioritized by national governments (e.g., climate change).[28]

Given such trends, understanding city diplomacy requires an appreciation for the international political economy of urban governance. For example, the landscape of philanthropic funding supporting the 21st century's "new wave" of city diplomacy has evolved in recent years. This was exhibited in the Rockefeller Foundation's 2019 decision to discontinue funding for the 100 Resilient Cities program, an enterprise to which the Foundation had given more than $150 million. Similarly, funding for city networks had already been discontinued by the Gates, Mellon, and Ford Foundations. The reasons cited for these defunding practices were unclear, primarily recognizing changes in strategic approaches and managerial shifts.[29] Nevertheless, such actions do not necessarily signal a trend towards the demise of funding for city diplomacy, as other policy issues are drawing interest anew; an example is the Open Society Foundation's support for the Mayors Migration Council (mmc) with similarly increasing investment seen also from foundations such as Bloomberg and Realdania or the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF). Additionally, it is prudent to acknowledge that national level diplomacy and policy making still matter and are instrumental in supporting city networking. For example, mmc has been funded in part by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and C40 in part by national bodies in the UK and Denmark. The German government has likewise played an important role in UN support for city networks addressing urban safety and in NGO efforts to address urban inequality and informal settlements. These examples indicate that city diplomacy

continues to evolve not only in the mechanics of practice but also in the broader political economy in which city networks operate.

Pandemic Turning Points?

The Covid-19 pandemic has given a fresh and urgent mandate for coordination among cities – specifically on matters of travel, medical supplies, and general harmonization of response procedures. Indeed, new urban networks for pandemic response may be a legacy of 2020, evolving potentially into permanent collaborations for building response capacities in anticipation of future pandemics and addressing broader issues related to public health.

The pandemic also potentially offers new ways to understand city diplomacy. The complexity of global urban governance is reflective not only of its deep history but also of its high importance in times of crisis like post-war rebuilding, climate change, and now pandemics. The Covid-19 pandemic has propelled local governments to remain (if even virtually) active on the global stage. City leaders have quickly re-focused their policy attention and resources, exhibiting nimble versatility in the face of rapidly unfolding and unanticipated change. Scholarship about city diplomacy amid the pandemic has referenced the ability of cities on the crisis frontlines to promote "multilateralism restored" from the bottom, leveraging networks developed through the late 1990s and early 2000s. This scholarship calls for city diplomacy to "up the ambition of city global co-operation" and for scholars to be similarly ambitious in undertaking related research.[30] The pandemic is an opportunity to heed this call. As city networks had been previously established, existing structures provided a clear line of communication directly to cities to collaborate and share information and approaches to the urban dynamic of the pandemic, allowing cities the resilience to better handle the crisis collectively.

Covid-19, as with many crises, transcends disciplinary boundaries and calls on flexible and transdisciplinary thinking not only from IR but also public administration, public health, and political sciences – in addition to the clear relevance of health sciences and epidemiology to policymaking. Such scholarship emerges not only from academia but also from practitioners and think tanks, signaling the emergence of a new generation of researchers connecting theory with practice. Organizations like Brookings Institution, Barcelona's Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), the Chicago Council of Global Affairs, and the University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House seek to stimulate conversations that have been largely confined to scholarship on diplomacy.

Scholar-practitioners and practitioner-scholars have also emerged as voices in city diplomacy, not only to relate personal diplomatic histories but also to theorize the intersection of IR issues and practical developments regarding city diplomacy. Such work has, for example, highlighted how city diplomacy as a common activity "has required diplomatic maturation and resulted in new diplomatic standing" for cities, but remains to be "tested with the return of great power politics."[31] Issues related to power dynamics and operational coordination for policy problems, particularly among city governments, are foregrounded by rapid-onset crises that also require sound scientific knowledge and exchange of information. For this reason, Covid-19 presents an opportunity to test the ability of cities and city networks to quickly re-orient their policy focus

and collectively mobilize in reaction to a problem that impacts nearly all communities with equal consequence.

In closing, it is prudent to note that city diplomacy remains embedded in fundamental ideas and questions about the practice and theory of international relations, but can also draw on a long historical legacy and a vocabulary and tradition having unfolded beyond the confines of diplomacy scholarship. Deepening perspectives into the progressive generations of city diplomacy, as briefly outlined in this essay, and appreciating the emergence of broader phenomena like global urban governance, would help scholars offer more informed insights both in times of relative stability and amid acute crises like pandemics. Such perspectives would also acknowledge that a new generation of scholarship is well positioned to make sense of the Covid-19 crisis in ways that establish new frontiers for research and practice.

Footnotes

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