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How Can 'City Diplomacy' Influence Security?

According to Michele Acuto, we have to start studying the impact that cities and those who govern them are having on global security. That's because their 'proximity' to today's security challenges is making them increasingly important actors in this domain.

By Michele Acuto for ISN

We live, many argue, in an 'urban' age in which cities have emerged from the anecdotal attention of the early-2000s to become an increasingly popular catalyst for public discourse and political debate. Indeed, international scholars and practitioners do not seem to be immune to the seduction of the city. Yet, rather than talking about the 'rise' of the city in international relations, we should instead be thinking about 're-emergence' and 'return': ever since the earliest days of civilisation, settlements have been deeply entrenched in more-than-local flows, economies and politics. Many key voices in urban studies and geography, like Peter Taylor or Peter Hall , have convincingly argued how the story of humanity is a story of cities. Nevertheless, international theorists have for a long time shied away from the impact that cities are having on an increasingly globalized world. But that's beginning to change.

While this 'urbanisation' of international studies has been for the most part been prompted by environmental concerns, cities are also critical components of the global security agenda. The development and expansion of ' city diplomacy' has woven a global texture of urban connections that have become increasingly important in shaping responses to an array of global challenges. Organizations like Mayors for Peace, for example, promote classical security matters like non-proliferation, while the Istanbul Water Consensus campaigns for water security.

This begs the obvious question, are cities really becoming more important players in international affairs? A growing body of evidence suggests that this might well be the case.

The Security Dimension

The intersection between the 'rise' of the urban age and the contemporary global security landscape presents both substantial limits and major opportunities. Urban coalitions have made efforts to act as 'peace actors' as in the case of the Municipal Alliance for Peace in the Middle East (MAP). This is an initiative born out of the concerted action of two domestic city networks, the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA) and the Union of Local Authorities in Israel (ULAI), to create a stable framework for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation based on municipal-level dialogue. Beginning with a co-operation agreement fostered by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions in

1999, the MAP process was formalized in 2005. Accordingly, MAP was not the result of one city's enterprise, but rather a collaborative effort that had to confront and accommodate the 'high politics' of national governments, as well as the challenges of maintaining diplomatic engagement from 'below'.

Indeed, it's here where processes like the MAP also begin to experience problems. Since its inception, the MAP has suffered from the reluctance of major donors to provide it with much needed financial assistance. This has undoubtedly tested the overall dynamicity and resilience of the MAP, especially when it comes to coalition building and responding to the turbulence that the international system quite often provides.

Difficulties aside, the peacebuilding role of small- and medium-sized municipalities suggests that cities – as represented by their local governments and elected leaders - can effectively engage in diplomatic and political activities. Indeed, these activities often extend way beyond short-term conflict resolution and peace brokering. Take, for example, the role that the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) has played in post-genocide Rwanda. In 2003, it helped to establish the Rwandese Association of Local Governments, an organization focused upon the promotion of local governance and reconciliation. Similar interventions in Africa, Latin America and Asia have also focused on gender issues, post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian aid and many other key aspects of today's security agenda.

City Diplomacy Unbound

Cities are increasingly claiming terrain and responsibility for areas of security that were once considered (perhaps wrongly) as the sole preserve of the nation-state. As Parag Khanna and I have previously [noted](), after 9/11 New York undertook a series of steps to beef up its own critical infrastructure protection capabilities. These include setting up its own intelligence bureau, sending police offers to Israel for special counter-terrorism training and opening overseas branches of the New York Police Department (NYPD). Similarly, after the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India's security discourse focused on the need for reforms of Mumbai's police and counter-terrorism capabilities as much or more than the state.

Cities therefore increasingly demand us to take them and their worldview far more seriously. Their proximity to the 'everyday' of security challenges and their growing enmeshment with key transnational actors like the World Bank, in turn, suggests that cities will play an ever-increasing role in safeguarding global security. The recently-launched [Global Network on Safer Cities]() (GNSC) is a case in point. Led by the United Nations' UN-Habitat office and the former mayor of Mexico City Marcelo Ebrard, the GNSC aims to equip local authorities and urban stakeholders with the tools to deliver and maintain urban security. And as outlined at the Sixth Session of the World Urban Forum, the GNSC "finds its relevance from the necessity to put together and systematize different experiences existing around the world on urban crime and violence, with the aim of advocating for safer cities and local crime prevention." City diplomacy on security issues then seems to be firmly geared towards expanding the role that cities and city leaders play in tackling global challenges.

Growing Attention, Growing Clout?

A growing number of lists and [rankings]() undoubtedly demonstrate the mounting public and academic interest in the importance and future role of cities. Yet rankings, undertaking place promotion and lobbying is not where city diplomacy ends. Indeed, as the now popular case of the [C40]() Climate Leadership Group suggests, we may soon be paying more attention to specific networks of cities and their respective leaders' responses to major international issues. Writing in the New York Times in November 2013, [Sam Roberts]() highlighted a growing number of "urban manifestos", like Benjamin

Barber's *If Mayors Ruled the World*, that call upon global audiences to take even more seriously local government's rightful place in tackling global challenges. This type of advocacy will undoubtedly lead to further analysis of the importance of cities – and, indeed their engagement with cities the world over – over the coming years.

In the security domain, publications like David Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains* add further substance to claims that cities have an increasing stake in foreign affairs and international security. Kilcullen not only emphasizes the rise and growing importance of urban warfare over the past few decades, he also calls upon military and security strategists to consider how key themes like counterinsurgency and terrorism now have a distinctly 'urban' dimension. However, several of these 'manifestos' have also been roundly criticised – particularly by proponents of [critical urban studies](#) – for their uncritical acceptance of the 'rise of cities' and potentially dangerous rhetoric of the 'urban age'. Purely reiterating the growing importance of cities, without further inquiry into deep urban (not just global) processes these very cities are embedded into, runs the risk of stifling debate on how to make the most of the 'rise of cities' in international affairs. Rather than just lobbying for cities, we should also engage them seriously in both international research and dialogue.

Overcoming superficial engagements is essential, and luckily works like Barber's do hold some promise in this direction. That's because cities and their elected leaders are undoubtedly making a serious contribution to tackling some of our most pressing security concerns. These include the development of new policymaking frameworks and different modes of city-to-city dialogue and cooperation. This, in turn, has opened up opportunities for new forms collective action, public-private initiatives and mediation efforts at the local and global level. As a result, many city leaders are more than just local representatives – they can also be international advocates and diplomats in their own right.

Mayors from many cities, not just the world's largest urban centres, have also lent their voice and support to a host of common causes. In doing so, they have helped to emphasize that cities are on the frontline of today's security challenges, especially when it comes non-traditional threats such as environmental degradation, resource scarcity, or organized crime. Nevertheless, this potential for truly transformative international action is inextricably linked to the more mundane, but yet crucial, role of cities as the texture of our everyday lives. Beyond the fascination of the 'urban age', then, we should understand that, before extraordinary global action, urbanism is after all about engaging with the ordinary reality just outside of our doorsteps.

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