

24 October 2013

Megacity Rising

Megacities and the political elites that run them are emerging as prominent players in international relations and economic governance. Today, Robert Muggah traces their rise to power and highlights the security challenges posed by 'turbo urbanization' in the developing world.

By Robert Muggah for ISN

The urban century has well and truly arrived. More than half of all humanity lives in cities compared to less than three per cent of the world's population two centuries ago. At least [two in every three people](#) on earth will live in urban metropolitan centers by 2030. By 2050 the ratio will rise to three in four. Due to unprecedented [urbanization](#) around the world, future population growth will be overwhelmingly concentrated in lower- and middle-income settings. And this is giving rise to sprawling cities – and [slums](#) – some of whom are emerging as geopolitical actors in their own right. Transformations in urban geography are thus precipitating changes in global governance.

Megacities, dense urban clusters of ten million residents or more, are set to be among the major drivers of global change. In the 1970s, there were just [3 megacities](#). Since then, their spread and rate of expansion has been breathtaking. Today, [one in five](#) people live in 27 megacities around the world. The leaders of these and other cities recognize how power and influence is diffusing locally. More than two thirds of the [global economy is today represented by some 600 cities](#), often referred to as the [C600](#). Megacities, along with second-tier cities, are displaying more economic dynamism and connectivity than ever. Yet just as the rise of cities [generates opportunities](#), they also have the potential to yield perilous instability.

There are both opportunities and dilemmas confronting megacities as they assume a more prominent place in international agenda setting. On the one hand, they promise to shift the balance of power to eastward, to Asia. In fact, the [vast majority](#) of the world's megacities are located outside the western hemisphere. Seven of the [top ten](#) are in Asia, led by Tokyo, and followed by Jakarta, Seoul, Delhi, Shanghai and Manila. And given demographic trends underway – with the Americas having already gone through its demographic transition – these trends are likely to accelerate.

Yet there is also a darker side to 'turbo urbanization', with some fearing the rise of urban dystopias. The [breakneck pace](#) of city growth in places like Karachi, Kinchasa, and Lagos is [concentrating minds](#), including those of security experts. Karachi, for example, grew more than [80 per cent from 2000 to 2010](#) – and is now home to an astonishing 21 million people. These and other so-called [fragile cities](#) are likely to be the locus of complex forms of political, social and economic conflict. They are already proving to be the arena of new forms of stabilization, pacification and social control. Diplomatic and

[defense strategists](#) predict that urban centers will soon be the principle site of warfare, and the [humanitarian sector](#) is increasingly attuned to these risks.

Capturing the city's promise

Although the sheer dimensions of megacities are novel, it is worth recalling that cities have long played a pivotal role in shaping international affairs. Even before the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, city-states from Athens and Tenochtitlan to Venice and Chengdu were the dominant and most successful forms of political and social organization. They comparatively recently gave way to nation states and newly created foreign ministries by the early nineteenth century. And after a two century hiatus, cities are making a come-back. Not surprisingly, [city diplomacy](#) – with mayors, councilors, municipal planners, and police chiefs as the chief emissaries – is re-emerging as a force in international relations. Although some federal civil servants resent the pivot back to cities, a kind of competitive cooperation is taking hold. Cities and their leaders are demanding more devolution of power while simultaneously asserting themselves on the global stage.

There are many ways in which cities – including megacities – are promoting international security priorities independently of national institutions. Since at least the 1950s, ["twinning"](#) projects deliberately promoted solidarity and exchange between urban centers, including North American and European cities that were demolished during the Second World War. Likewise, initiatives such as [Mayors for Peace](#) and [Cities for Peace](#) in the 1980s and the [Municipal Alliance for Peace in the Middle East](#) since the early 2000s assembled hundreds if not thousands of cities to demand the prevention of nuclear and conventional war. More recently, alliances such as the [Global Safer City Network](#) and the [European Forum for Urban Safety](#) are nurturing international partnerships between dozens of cities –including megacities – and exporting new models of public security.

Cities have long played a critical role in stimulating economic progress and international development at home and abroad. In addition to twinning schemes to hasten post-conflict recovery and reconstruction in post-war cities, new forms of city-led bilateral and multilateral exchange are emerging. There are many examples of aid agreements between US cities and African counterparts, Australian cities with others in the South Pacific, and Canadian cities among partners in Latin America and the Caribbean. The modalities of inter-city assistance vary and the amounts exchanged are comparatively small. However, channels such as the [Millennium Towns and Cities Campaign](#) and the [New Cities Foundation](#) involve hundreds of cities intent on addressing challenges stemming from underdevelopment. In a bid to promote a more predictable approach to overseas assistance, the [United Cities and Local Governments](#) network launched a committee on development cooperation and city diplomacy in 2010. What is more, the issue of how cities can contribute is finding its way into discussions of the post-2015 development agenda. A [High Level Panel](#) recently noted how "cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost."

Not surprisingly, a new vanguard of city diplomats is emerging. And while the legal implications of their efforts are being debated by national politicians and civil servants, these "glocalists" are getting involved in front-line activities – negotiating agreements, gathering information, preventing conflicts and transferring resources. Increasingly, leaders in megacities are translating and codifying global norms agreed in the United Nations or other forums into their municipal legal systems. For example, since 2005, the [C40 initiative](#) has gathered 60 cities and their mayors to promote clean-energy, waste management and sustainable transport and is currently one of the most visible (and effective) exponents of the climate change debate. Meanwhile, in 2007 the world's largest city created the [Tokyo Emissions Trading Scheme \(ETS\)](#) which has generated real reductions in energy consumption.

Megacities are going to influence norms, processes and [revolutionize governance](#) at a scale hitherto unimagined. There are several factors that explain why megacities are poised to profoundly shake-up

international affairs. For one, they are better resourced than ever before. Megacities like Bangkok, New York, Shanghai, and Tokyo have larger GDPs and public budgets than most countries. And due to the ways in which globalization has reconfigured networks of production and hastened decentralization cities are also exerting growing autonomy from states. As a result, many megacities are more able to exert control over taxation and revenue collection streams. Likewise, the geography of megacities, their emigrant populations and the structure of their economies all shape the extent to which they are outward looking or not. As [Edward Glaeser notes](#), successful cities are marked by “small firms, smart people, and connections to the outside world”.

While the 600 largest cities stand-out for their contribution to global growth, some will be more effective than others. These include what some commentators describe as “global hubs”, “megacities” and “gateway cities”. As [Parag Khanna explains](#), global hubs are the primary nodes of the global economy – places like Hong Kong, London, New York and Tokyo – and centers of finance and commerce. Megacities are comprised mostly of lower- and middle-income centers, with cities like Cairo, Istanbul, Mumbai and Sao Paulo most prominent among them. Meanwhile, gateway cities are the new frontier markets and include Cape Town, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur and Almaty among their ranks. A challenge will be finding ways to bring cities together and [consolidate transnational networks](#). But not all cities command the same level of resources or capabilities. Indeed, there are risks that some cities are falling rapidly behind.

Avoiding the city’s peril

In spite of the many virtues afforded by cities, there are also looming challenges confronting the world’s fastest growing urban centers. And it is these cities – struggling as they are to manage their domestic affairs or productively integrate into global systems – that will be the focus of major engagement in the years to come. These [fragile cities](#) echo many of the same anxieties associated with fragile and failed states. They exhibit fissures in the social contract linking urban elites and city residents. They are often unable to secure a monopoly over legitimate violence or deliver basic services. These cities are frequently confronted with new forms of instability and alternate governance structures. As a result, they are raising alarm bells in security and development circles owing to fears of the contagion that might arise from their collapse. Some military analysts fear that mega-slums are the future sites of [\(national\) insecurity](#) and [future conflict](#) while others contend that so-called [feral cities](#) are already “natural havens for a variety of hostile non-state actors” and may pose “security threats on a scale hitherto not encountered.”

City fragility is both a catalyst and a consequence of transformations in broader national and municipal governance and spatial organization. In many of the world’s fastest-growing cities in [Latin America, the Caribbean](#) and [sub-Saharan Africa](#), favelas, slums and shantytowns have assumed the character of forbidden no-go zones – or zones of exception – well beyond the control of public security forces. Within them are a cocktail of factors that exacerbate urban violence and contribute to vicious cycles that disrupt [upward and outward mobility](#) of their most vulnerable residents. Of course, in many cities, slums are often less dangerous than often assumed. But even when evidence to the contrary is mobilized, many upper- and middle-class residents may still build (higher) walls and elaborate (and more sophisticated) security systems to shield themselves, giving rise to a Manichean landscape of “safe” gated communities and “violent” peripheries.

In some megacities the explosion of violence and fear is literally reshaping the built environment. It is giving rise to what Tunde Agbola calls the “[architecture of fear](#)” and Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O’Neill describe as “[infrastructural violence](#)”. The consequence is a progressive fragmentation of public space, a breakdown of social cohesion through the generation of new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination, and potentially more violence and insecurity. It is worth stressing how fragile cities can be understood as intimately connected to the structural dynamics of

urban agglomeration, as well as to the competing interests of — and power relations between — social groups. Yet, city disorder need not imply that urban spaces are unable to cope with such challenges and ultimately transform for the better. To the contrary, it is the very [resilience of cities](#) that is too often overlooked, and a source of resistance and agency from which important and positive lessons can be drawn.

A path to the future

The promise and peril facing megacities is increasingly recognized. Yet it remains to be seen how they will reconcile these dilemmas in the twenty-first century. There is no doubt that some megacities will prosper, shaping and making international norms in innovative new ways. Others will struggle, and become the focus of diplomatic envoys, military establishments and aid agencies. Megacities are already exerting their potential to shape the direction of the global agenda. As Benjamin Barber [observes](#), cities not only have the potential to govern globally - in terms of “soft governance” - in some cases they already are. And given the genuinely transnational nature of twenty first century threats - from climate change, economic volatility, health pandemics and terrorism - their leadership will be more necessary than ever.

Although embedded in a state-centric multilateral system, cities are demonstrating a surprising capacity to influence the direction of security and development policy and action. The proliferation of myriad city networks and forums suggests that they too recognize strength in numbers. Yet they still lack a genuine voice in the United Nations, a lacuna that groups like the UCLG and [other agencies](#) are attempting to address. Some experts are proposing that a parliament of mayors could generate more effective collective action from the bottom-up. And while aspiring for global voice, the real strength of cities - including the largest ones - is that they simultaneously operate at the local level. It is in their vast neighborhoods and grassroots movements, and not necessarily the halls of the international assemblies, that the [metropolitan revolution](#) has already begun.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Foreign Policy for an Urban World](#)

[The Rich, the Clean, and the Kind](#)

[Preparing for Disasters in Global Cities: An International Comparison](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's [Dossiers](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

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[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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