CHAPTER 2

The Historical, Legal, and Geographic Evolution of City Diplomacy

Abstract After more than a century since the first appearance of city diplomacy, cities’ capacity to act internationally is no more in doubt. Around the world, the debate shifted from whether cities can act internationally to the limits of their influence. The high rate of urbanization worldwide and the concentration of the world’s economy in a number of global cities are not enough to explain such a trend. Alongside these elements, a major political turn has risen in city halls since the end of the Second World War. Reconciliation, solidarity, regionalism, sustainable development, resilience, and now post-pandemic economic recovery: cities international action has been continuously evolving, guided by their commitment to link local to global. The chapter will illustrate this progressive widening of city diplomacy’s scope and impact, including insight into interaction with other international actors, shifting legal boundaries, and mutating geographies.

Keywords City diplomacy · International organizations · NGOs · North-South cooperation · South-South cooperation · Triangular cooperation · Multilateralism
THE ANCIENT ROOTS OF A MODERN PRACTICE

Modern-day city diplomacy is the result of a dual evolutionary trend in both international relations and city management. Even if cities’ agency in international relations and world politics has risen steadily over more than a century, it is hardly the first time cities play a relevant role on the international stage. The oldest of political institutions—the word “politics” itself comes from πόλις ( pólis), the Greek word for the city—deeply influenced international relations for millennia.

Even if today’s city diplomacy lies on unprecedented sociopolitical and institutional balances, history reveals the propensity of cities across the world to connect with each other in order to prosper in a common trait across civilizations: “Cities come in groups because they need each other to be successful” (Taylor 2012, 10). A core feature of today’s city diplomacy, the coexistence of competition and cooperation relations between cities (see Chapter 5), has acted as a driver of human civilization throughout history (Clark 2013). Archeologists and historians have proved that economic and demographic expansion generally occurs within clusters of cities connected by trade routes—along which culture and political ideas can spread (Taylor 2012; Taylor et al. 2012).

Moreover, as illustrated by Peter Taylor, cities’ economic and demographic rise in the past mainly took place in the framework of weak forms of centralization. Across the world, such a condition originated either from specific institutional architecture—e.g., the fable centralization of the Roman Empire—or from the crisis of the central authority, leading to a period of political uncertainty—e.g., the transfer of power from the Yuan Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty in China (1368–1644) (Taylor 2012).

Most famous examples of cities’ centrality in Western history are probably found in Greek Poleis and Italian Signorie, even if their action could probably be compared to micro-states’ diplomacy rather than city diplomacy in its modern meaning. Although, Europe’s Middle Age, with its complex framework of overlapping authorities and allegiances (kingdoms, aristocracy, the church, and cities), created the conditions for what could indeed be considered as the ancestor of modern-day city networks, the Hanseatic League,1 whose cross-border governance of nearly 200 cities

1A new Hanseatic League was created in 1980 as a network reuniting cities that belonged to the original League or had active trading with it. In July 2020 its membership currently comprised 194 cities in 16 countries (Städtebund die Hanse 2020).
enjoyed effectiveness and legitimacy and lasted five centuries (from 1160 to 1660) (Take 2017).

Despite such a relevant role played by cities throughout the centuries, the founding moment of the current international order, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, clearly stated that international relations are the exclusive realm of states. The concept of Westphalian sovereignty itself—i.e., legally equal states on the international stage, each entitled to the full control on their domestic affairs to the exclusion of every external power - long precluded the involvement of actors other than central governments in international relations. If that did not hinder cities from perduring their role as the beacon of social, cultural, and economic progress, it did mark the impossibility for cities to establish formal diplomatic relations with foreign actors.

Two hundred sixty-five years after Westphalia, at the 1913 Universal Exposition in Ghent, a group of mayors from across the world met for the International Congress of the Art of Building Cities and Organising Community Life—generally considered as the birth of modern city diplomacy. Emile Braun, then mayor of the Flemish city, convened his foreign counterparts in order to “deliberate on the major problems that arise from the universal nature of the conditions of present-day life, which are more or less the same everywhere” (UCLG 2013). The congress originated the International Union of Cities (renamed in 1928 International Union of Local Authorities—IULA), the first global city network, whose goal consisted of fostering technical city-to-city cooperation in local administration and urban planning. Quickly resuming its activities after the Second World War, IULA emerged as a key supporter of cities’ empowerment as actors of post-war reconciliation.

In fact, city twinnings spread in Western Europe with the explicit political desire to reconcile former enemies. The practice, started in the 1920s (see Chapter 1, footnote 3), was revived through the agreements signed by British and German municipalities in 1947: Oxford and Bonn, Reading and Düsseldorf, Bristol and Hannover and, quite evocatively, Coventry and Kiel—both heavily destroyed by bombing during the War. Three years later, the first Franco-German twinning agreement was signed in 1950 between Montbéliard and Ludwigsburg, an example quickly followed by dozens of cities on both sides of the border.

City networks are in no little part responsible of such spreading of bilateral agreements: alongside IULA, a key role was played by the Council of European Municipalities, the first regional city network
(created in 1951 and later renamed the Council of European Municipalities and Regions—CEMR), by the People-to-people program launched in 1956 by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower (reorganized in 1967 as a nonpartisan nonprofit organization under the name of Sister Cities International), and by the United Towns Organisation (UTO, created in 1957). UTO’s international activism in favor of city diplomacy led in 1971 to the first official recognition by the United Nations of town twinings’ role in fostering international cooperation (Town Twinning as a Means of International Co-Operation 1971).

Municipal cooperation between French and German cities emerged as an example of city diplomacy’s capacity not only to predate but to facilitate official reconciliation between former enemies. In 1963, when France and West Germany signed the Élysée Treaty, 130 twinning agreements between the two countries had already been signed (Garcia 2017).

Alongside reconciliation goals, bilateral city diplomacy quickly deployed to create new partnerships between cities in the North and the South of the world, complementing a core goal of long-term solidarity with cultural and friendship purposes. The first twinning agreement between a French and an African city was signed in 1958 by Marseille and Abidjan. In France this process also involved small and medium cities: Millau (Aveyron) signed a twinning agreement with Louga (regional capital in North-western Senegal) in 1963, in 1967 Loudun (Vienne) twinned with Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso.

Meanwhile, in democratic nations, city diplomacy’s scope widened to include a political stance on international issues. Often acting in cooperation with local civil society organizations, cities in the United States and Western Europe started coordinating their opposition to a series of foreign policy issues, such as the arms race, migration, relations with nondemocratic regimes, and climate change (see Chapters 4 and 7). To enhance their international action and positioning, cities started multiplying and structuring their international partnerships: city networks rose from 43 in 1975 to 200 today (Acuto et al. 2017).

Following a process that started in 1995 aiming to rationalize their actions and enhance the impact of local governments on the international stage, the two leading global networks, IULA and UTO, decided in 2004 to merge into United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). UCLG is currently the largest and most representative network of cities, featuring more than 240,000 member local authorities, either by direct membership or through the 175 adhering associations of local and regional
governments. Metropolis, the network of major cities in the world, also participate in the merge, thus evolving into the metropolitan section of UCLG.

At the European level, a group of secondary cities led by Lyon, Milan, Frankfurt, Birmingham, and Rotterdam created in 1986 Eurocities. Headquartered in Brussels, Eurocities reunites in June 2020 more than 140 major European cities and has established itself as a privileged partner of the European Union in urban policy, emerging as one of the most active regional city networks. Similar networks rose across the world, such as CityNet in the Asia-Pacific region (established in 1987 with the support of UNESCAP, UNDP, and UN-Habitat), or Mercociudades in Latin America (launched in 1995 as Mercosur’s city network).

As Chapters 3–9 will highlight, cities’ reactivity on a set of transnational issues, coupled with intense advocacy campaigns to sustainably impact their global governance, has led them to become a praised partner in implementing the main multilateral agendas. Parallelly, central governments, both in democratic and nondemocratic countries, have been shifting their attitude toward such capacity of cities to act internationally.

**The Relations Between Cities and the Other Actors of International Relations**

*States*

In line with the mentioned concept of Westphalian sovereignty, international law has long recognized states as the only actors of international relations—a privilege now shared with international organizations. Even if today cities from all over the world are multiplying their international activities, there is little doubt of the hierarchical relationship between national and city diplomacies—regardless of some provocative, yet ineffective declarations of some mayors unhappy with the foreign policy of the national government and pondering the creation of a city-state.

Across the world, governments have shown a wide variety of approaches toward their cities’ international actions. Both institutional and political factors impact the nature of this relationship. First, highly centralized countries, particularly those run by autocratic regimes, usually leave little to no space for independent city diplomacy. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply the absence of cities’ international actions. As further developed in the next section of this chapter, both democracies
and autocracies are increasingly recurring to city diplomacy as a tool of soft power, complementing their public diplomacy strategy. In doing so, nations acknowledge the impact of the relationships cities are able to establish with their foreign counterparts through their co-creation and participatory approach. Cities’ soft power appears in that distinct from conventional public diplomacy, often based on “asymmetrical one-way efforts to inform and build a case for a nation’s position” (Snow 2020).

It is worth noticing that democratic governments are not per se a guarantee for cooperation between national and city diplomacies. Certainly, the local election of mayors and political independence from the central government are critical drivers of city diplomacy. Paradoxically, so has proven to be substantial political divergence between the two levels of government. Over the last few decades, controversial foreign policy decisions taken by democratic central government have allowed for mayors to rise as representatives of their constituencies opposition. This practice has often involved the creation of national coalitions of mayors voicing their criticism within and beyond national borders and receiving, as a result, the support of foreign cities—and sometimes even governments. Such an inter-institutional discord has peaked with regard to the topics of disarmament, the environment, and migration (see Chapters 4, 7, and 9, respectively). Even if many “rebels” cities have raised their (and their mayors’) international visibility across the world, the widening of the inter-institutional foreign policy hiatus rarely represented a goal of city diplomacy. As this handbook aim at illustrating, multilevel partnership emerges as a fundamental tool to tackle today’s main transnational challenges.

**International Organizations**

Over the last few decades, cities and international organizations have multiplied and strengthened their partnerships. For a long time, cities have been considered by international organizations as mere expressions of civil society (such is the framework of the mentioned 1971 resolution by the United Nations). Nevertheless, over the last few years, the approach of most organizations has consistently changed, as they recognized the specificities linked to the municipal level of government. The opportunity of their involvement in multilevel partnerships with national and other subnational governments is today mentioned in most international agendas, such as the Paris Agreement or the 2030 Agenda. Some
international organizations have also issued specific agendas aimed at cities or local governments in general, such as the United Nations’ New Urban Agenda (2016), the Urban Agenda for the EU (2016) and the Union for the Mediterranean Urban Agenda (2017) (United Nations 2016; European Union 2016; Union for the Mediterranean 2017).

Moreover, several international organizations have created their own programs targeting urban governments and communities, sometimes involving the creation of city networks. As an example, UNESCO alone currently features eight different initiatives involving cities. 2

Even if the search for “a seat at the global table,” the widespread goal of many cities and city networks to be formally included in global governance’s mechanisms, remains unaccomplished, international organizations are offering them several opportunities to share their vision and thus influence world politics. Notable examples of such a trend include the role attributed by the New Urban Agenda to the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments mentioned in Chapter 1, the inclusion of cities in the Conference on Migrants and Cities in the framework the International Organization for Migration’s global policy forum, the International Dialogue on Migration (see Chapter 9), and the creation of the Urban 20 (U20), the G20’s stakeholder engagement group for cities (see Box 5.2).

**International Funds and Development Banks**

Currently, cities’ access to international loans depends on the approval of their national state. This is due to the fact that cities lack international law’s personality: the incapacity of the city government to pay off its debt would imply the responsibility of the national government. Cities across the world are advocating for a change in this situation, not only to avoid complex bureaucratic negotiations with the central government but also in consideration that some central governments might decide, for political reasons, to prevent cities governed by the opposition from receiving much-needed loans.

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2 UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (ICCAR), World Heritage Cities Programme, Megacities Alliance for Water Climate, the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Cities, UNESCO’s Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience Programme, and UNESCO/Netexplo Observatory.
Currently, international lobbying for changing such procedure is led by the mentioned U20, aiming at promoting a G20-led evolution of international finance (Rodas 2020).

**Nongovernmental Organizations**

City diplomacy features a strong tradition of cooperation with both local and foreign NGOs. As a result of the spread of the participatory approach to international relations discussed in Chapter 1, most cities’ international activities include partnerships with NGOs—a practice that is often required in calls for projects issued by governments, international organizations, and charities. Moreover, cities sometimes decide to follow NGOs’ footsteps, especially by getting involved in decentralized cooperation in cities where local NGOs were already active. Finally, cities themselves might issue calls for international projects in their partner cities open to their local NGOs. For example, such practice has been used by cities like Paris and Barcelona to provide rapid support to their partner cities during the COVID-19 crisis (see Chapter 3). As in their relations with businesses, the international relations department should make sure that NGOs with whom they partner are trustworthy, that their inclusion in the project would not negatively impact it in terms of public image, and that the NGOs are not following any hidden agenda.

**Private Sector**

As another consequence of the participatory approach to city diplomacy, municipalities are increasingly involving local businesses in their actions abroad. This allows municipalities to share the cost of international activities they could not afford otherwise. Furthermore, as municipalities frequently aim at capitalizing on existing international connections, they quite often create or strengthen official relations with cities where their local companies have been investing. This also works in the other way, with city-to-city relations leading to enhanced B2B relations (see Chapter 5).

Finally, as the participatory approach is increasingly included in the call for projects issued by third parties such as international organizations and charities (see Box 3.1), cities are increasingly interacting with foreign businesses in the framework of bilateral and multilateral initiatives.
This cooperation with the private sector generally does not entail specific issues, as long as the international relations department verifies the quality of private partners and the existence of any conflicts of interests or hidden agendas.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

City diplomacy activities have to comply with two legal frameworks simultaneously.

First, each national (or statal, in case of some federation like the United States) legal system defines (either through constitutional or ordinary law, or a combination of the two) the limits of its cities’ international action. For example, this might include the need for a pre-emptive approval of twinning agreements by national governments. Needless to say, highly centralized countries, especially when coupled with authoritarian regimes, tend to build legal systems preventing cities from most, or any autonomy in designing their own international strategy. This does not preclude cities from implementing a set of city diplomacy activities, as long as they comply with often strict national guidelines. As mentioned, central governments in democratic and decentralized countries as well might put in place tools to directly influence the content of their cities’ diplomacy. Such a practice is usually implemented by issuing calls for projects to support the creation of city-to-city partnerships in selected countries, and on topics that correspond to national foreign policy’s priorities.

The second legal framework, that of international law, pays little attention to cities. As discussed, such a framework has been designed around the assumption that only states and intergovernmental organizations are entitled to international law’s personality. This means that subnational governments act, from a perspective of international law, as mere agents of their national administration, responsible for their action in case of illegal conduct.³

It is worth noticing that, despite the situation is not likely to dramatically change in the next future, both of these frameworks experience a de

³Even if it is not a common procedure, central governments could charge a mayor with the task of signing binding international treaties on behalf of the central government—i.e. granting them the “Full Powers”.

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facto shifting. On a national level, a growing number of central governments are welcoming and encouraging city diplomacy. While specific goals and modalities might change, this approach generally shares, as mentioned, a public diplomacy perspective: cities are increasingly seen as important actors in raising the country’s international profile—particularly in those situations where direct national involvement is considered ineffective or even counterproductive. This trend of “proxy actions” differs slightly across the world but encompasses democratic and authoritarian, centralized, decentralized countries.

An example from democracies is that of France’s action in Francophone Africa. Well aware of France’s mixed perception by the local population and political leaders in that region—a consequence of both colonization and postcolonial relationships—the French government is increasingly encouraging and supporting French cities’ actions in Africa. By doing so, the government aims to benefit from their capacity to establish cooperative relations with local governments and build trust between populations, while opening the door to export and business expansion opportunities (‘Speech at the University of Ouagadougou’ 2017; Philippe 2019; Ledoux 2019).

Clearly, the French government can only suggest its cities such a strategy, as any imposition would violate both the national and international legal systems (Kihlgren Grandi 2020; Council of Europe 1985).

Following a similar public diplomacy goal—but with much more robust capacity to influence the decision of its municipalities—China is reinforcing its Belt and Road Initiative with a city diplomacy component (UNOSSC 2020), and is encouraging its cities to join a number of city networks. More recently, Chinese cities’ have been participating in the government’s “mask diplomacy”: Chinese local governments offered personal protective equipment (PPE) to their twin and friend cities across the world, just like the Chinese governments did with foreign states.

Notwithstanding the very different level of political pressure to comply with the political priorities of their central governments, both French and Chinese cities active in the framework of these governmental programs receive an enhanced international exposure, with the potential of further international opening and connections. Nevertheless, the perception of
a governmental drive of city actions can lead foreign partners to cancel partnerships.\(^4\)

On the international level, two elements are pushing toward a more influential position of cities:

1. Increasingly widespread recognition of their mastery in swiftly addressing transnational challenges through international networks, programs, and campaigns. This point can be seen as a success for cities’ and city networks’ advocacy, to a large extent focused on the international recognition of city diplomacy’s added value on the regional/global stage;

2. The mentioned rise of partnerships between cities and international organizations and bodies, namely the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union, and G20. Mayors and city networks representatives are increasingly invited to international meetings and summits to express their voice on the implementation of major global agendas. Parallelly, international organizations have created a series of city networks themselves, to enhance local government contribution to their goals. This includes the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the World Health Organization’s Healthy Cities network, as well as Cities Alliance, launched in 1999 by the World Bank and UN-Habitat to foster sustainable development in the world’s poorest neighborhoods.

As a result of this dual shifting, cities frequently find themselves in a somewhat paradoxical situation featuring a hiatus between strict legal limitations of their international activities, and de facto empowerment. This situation is likely to perdure in the upcoming future, while on the long term it might evolve into a more structured engagement of cities in national foreign policy and international organizations, possibly tending to a mixed system of international relations where the voice of cities is integrated into national and international decision-making processes with an urban impact (see Afterword).

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4 In October 2019, Prague mayor Zdenek Hřib’s opposition to the “One China” policy clause in his city’s twinning agreement with Beijing led the latter to prematurely end the agreement. Three months later, Prague’s decision to sign a twinning agreement with Taipei led Shanghai to cancel its twinning agreement with the Czech capital (AFP 2020a, b).
Shifting Geographies

Another major feature of city diplomacy lies in its unequal geographical spread. Despite the active participation of a rising number of (mainly large) African and Asian cities, city diplomacy remains a phenomenon concentrated in Europe, which hosts the highest number of city networks’ headquarters (107 over a total of 200) (Acuto et al. 2017; Bansard et al. 2017) and the Americas.

This effect can be linked to three main dynamics:

1. Modern city diplomacy originated in Europe in the early twentieth century and quickly expanded to the Americas thanks to the solid political, economic, and cultural connections and similarities between these regions;
2. The relatively higher rate of participation of cities in Europe and the Americas to global networks, and the spread of networks connecting these two regions, in particular Europe and Latin America, such as the Euro-Latin American Alliance for Cooperation between Cities (AL-LAs), the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI), and the Union of Portuguese-Language Capital Cities (UCCLA);
3. Despite being a global trend, decentralization—a core driver of city diplomacy\(^5\)—remains far more accentuated in Europe and the Americas compared to Africa and Asia.

Nevertheless, these geographies are gradually shifting, with a constant rise of global networks’ membership by cities in Africa and Asia, and the multiplication of regional city diplomacy in these two continents, mainly as a result of the mentioned global trend toward decentralization. Moreover, as highlighted in Chapter 3, city diplomacy is experiencing the spreading of more-balanced and mutually beneficial partnerships between cities in the South and the North, based in no little part on the rise of transnational challenges affecting cities worldwide, such as climate change, migration, violent extremism, and the digital revolution.

\(^5\) As cities cooperate mainly in the topics they directly manage, it is not surprising that decentralized countries, such as the Netherlands or Canada, experience higher international activism of cities.
This new approach has led some cities in the North to restructure their international relations department to merge the team devoted to relationships with cities in the North with those in charge of cooperation with developing countries. In line with this trend, international donors are increasingly modifying their call for projects: an example is the European Union, which introduced calls for projects whose lead applicant shall be a local authority from a developing country (European Commission 2015).

Another key transformation consists of the spread of South-South city diplomacy, both in the framework of bilateral and multilateral partnerships. This includes cities’ involvement in conflict and post-conflict situations (see Chapter 4) and development cooperation (Chapter 3). An example is provided by the South American cities’ cooperation in the framework of citizen security, which emerged as a human rights response to a shared legacy of authoritarian regimes between the 1960s and 1980s (Rodrigues and Mattioli 2017).

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The subdivision in institutional relations and decentralized cooperation has long been a common feature of Municipalities in the Global North. European municipalities sometimes also feature a dedicated office for applying to and managing European projects and grants. For example, this has been the case in Milan (La Ferla and Commodaro 2020). Understandably, IR departments in Global South’s cities tend not to have such division.
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