City Diplomacy: An Introduction to the Forum

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Summary

Whilst city diplomacy as a topic of study is gaining more attention, the practice is often approached through fields other than the study of diplomacy or international relations. A commonly accepted framework, and the governance system that supports it, is missing to shape research and scholarship. This forum outlines the key parameters of a framework for city diplomacy rooted in earlier research and validated through five essays by geographically and professionally diverse authors. The framework introduced in this introduction structured the direction of the essays that are informed by academic research and by practitioners. The essays also propose policies and strategies to make city diplomacy more systematically and officially integrated into global affairs.

Keywords

city diplomacy – subnational diplomacy – noncoercive statecraft

1 Introduction

Whilst city diplomacy as a topic of study is gaining more attention, the practice is often approached through fields other than the study of diplomacy or international relations. A commonly accepted framework, and the governance system that supports it, are missing to shape research and scholarship. This
forum outlines the key parameters of a framework for city diplomacy rooted in earlier research and validated through five essays by geographically and professionally diverse authors. The framework shown in this introduction structured the direction of the essays, which are informed by academic research and by practitioners. The essays also propose policies and strategies to make city diplomacy more systematically and officially integrated into global affairs.

City diplomacy is the conduct of international affairs by a city government to benefit the security and prosperity of local constituents. City diplomacy centres on fostering good relations with international actors through collaboration, cooperation, cultural ties, civic exchanges and shows of goodwill while promoting trade, policies and the city’s global image. City diplomacy, as one form of subnational diplomacy, is bounded by foreign policy at the national level. Cities can take initiatives to advance their global interests, but in principle, they cannot infringe on national diplomacy and foreign policy.

The key parameters of a framework for city diplomacy include (1) the contextual factors that affect the success or failure of a city’s international affairs; and (2) the functions of city diplomacy as a mechanism of statecraft.

Contextual factors range from fixed (e.g., geographic location) to dynamic (e.g., popularity of the leader). These contextual factors are the inputs necessary for any international actor, such as a city, to successfully conduct international affairs, engage globally and enhance the prosperity and security of the citizens it serves. The contextual factors can be divided into three categories: (1) relational, (2) instrumental and (3) discursive. The first category, relational, includes factors such as culture, values, beliefs and identity. The policy positions and attitudes towards policies fall under this first category as well. The second category, instrumental, refers to the condition of being official, having sovereignty, stability and the authority to enact policies and enforce law and order. The third category, discursive, refers to having capital, geographic assets, skilled labour and access to information, technology, networks, allies or partnerships. Depending on how a city diplomacy activity is bound by time and target audience, the categorisation of contextual factors and appropriate measurements varies.

The five functions of city diplomacy include: (1) trade and economic development, which has the most tangible outcomes; (2) diplomatic representation and protocol, which is necessary for facilitating international affairs; (3) fostering international exchanges, cultural ties and aid, which overlaps with public diplomacy and is crucial for building and maintaining relationships; (4) civic engagement and education, which is necessary to elevate domestic understanding of and appreciation for international engagement;
and (5) policy collaboration, advocacy and action, which is necessary for cities to advance the policy interests of their constituents as well as strengthen their partnerships. Through these functions, city diplomacy as a mechanism of non-coercive statecraft manages the international relationships of a city such that the contextual factors are both utilised and enhanced. Ultimately, these five key functions are interdependent.

The strategy behind city diplomacy must be designed based on contextual factors of a city and how they are utilised to deliver on each of the five functions. The framework for city diplomacy, as outlined here, intends to facilitate such assessments. But for city diplomacy to be efficiently and effectively integrated into international affairs, new and improved policies, definitions and governance structures are needed. The essays in this forum provide suggestions in this regard as well.

2 Essays in the Forum

Max Bouchet, through his essay ‘Strengthening Foreign Policy through Subnational Diplomacy’, sheds light on the federal-local dynamics in the United States with policy implications for city diplomacy. The essay by Alexander Buhmann, ‘Unpacking Joint Attributions of Cities and Nation States as Actors in Global Affairs’, provides a theory for understanding this dynamic with a focus on an important overlap between city diplomacy and diplomacy conducted by the nation state, public diplomacy.

In addition to understanding the dynamics between city and nation state, to enhance the practice of city diplomacy it is important to consider the dynamics between non-state actors, such as diaspora groups, and cities as well. Antonio Alejo’s essay, ‘Diasporas as Actors in Urban Diplomacy’, provides an example to shed light on how and why non-state actors shape the contextual factors of city diplomacy and facilitate the functions of the practice. For example, Alejo challenges the notion that foreign policies are only set at the national level and encourages a broader scope for the fifth function of city diplomacy.

The essay by Rosa Groen, ‘Understanding the Context for Successful City Diplomacy: Attracting International Organisations’, captures the contextual factors and explains them through an example. The essay by Mayor Peter Kurz, ‘A Governance System that Supports City Diplomacy: The European Perspective’, provides a practitioner’s perspective to capture the functions of city diplomacy and assess the dynamics between cities and national governments as actors in international affairs.
3 Conclusions

The essays in this Forum, and the proposed outline for a framework, intend to promote debate and be a source of inspiration for future academic work. They uncover aspects of the dynamics between national diplomacy and cities’ international practices to highlight areas in need of policy and strategy development. For example, the role that city diplomacy can or should play in shaping foreign policies remains an area that needs further exploration and thought leadership. Similarly, the role that cities can play to engage domestic constituents and connect them to foreign policies that represent them needs to be better envisioned to inform the future direction of the practice and how it can be strategically integrated into a country’s statecraft.

While officials may acknowledge city diplomacy to be essential for national security, theories need to be developed to better capture this connection and provide actionable analysis and a framework. Inter-disciplinary studies seem to be one way to approach the topic. This has been the focus of my recent studies in which I draw on theories from natural sciences to help guide the thinking behind how city diplomacy, as one form of non-coercive statecraft, contributes to a country’s national security and global influence. However, while policies, such as the City and State Diplomacy Act in the United States, are being developed to integrate city diplomacy into the broader system of diplomacy, the sustainability and feasibility of such efforts remain under-studied.

Cities can be seen as the ‘in-between power’ in global governance. On the one hand, they have the authority that comes from being a part of the government system, and on the other, they have the legitimacy that comes from being closer to the people they serve, ideologically and physically. To ensure sustainability of the practice of city diplomacy, the dynamics between it and the state and other government entities, as well as non-states such as the citizens, remain valuable areas of study. For the latter, a better understanding of the role of non-state actors, from diaspora groups to international companies, as actors in city diplomacy would be insightful.

The crucial but often hard-to-measure value of global engagement remains an area that can benefit from innovative approaches to impact assessment. For example, indicators may be designed to assess and rank cities based on the strength of their international networks. Based on such ranking and metrics, the integration of cities into global governance can become more systematic, transparent and sustainable. Further, metrics need to be developed to assess aspects of the three categories of contextual factors, to assess the impact of city diplomacy and to capture how and why this practice enhances a country’s international affairs.
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