



Cities Are The Future: We Need To Coordinate Their International Diplomacy

July 29, 2019 **Jacob McCarty** *The Hill*

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When it comes to influence, the future lies in the cities.

For the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population is now living in an urban environment. By the middle of this century, nearly 70 percent of all people will be. And by one estimate, 1.5 million people are added to the global urban population every week.

Cities, moreover, are emerging as critical economic engines. More than 80 percent of global GDP is generated as a result of activity taking place in the world's cities. That trend, moreover, is poised to continue; according to the World Economic Forum, just 39 urban centers will be responsible for an estimated 15 percent of the planet's total economy by the end of the next decade.

Indeed, by almost every metric, international politics are today being shaped, or at least influenced, by the world's metropolitan areas. So what is America doing to take advantage of this trend?

The answer, at least up until now, has been "not much."

While official nation-to-nation diplomacy remains the purview of the State Department, contacts at a sub-state level continue to be unfocused and ad hoc. Programs like "Sister Cities" — which don't necessarily produce tangible benefits through their various memorandums of understanding — or the over 125 multilateral networks and forums in which city governments participate (which is often sporadic) rarely acknowledge where they fit in the larger bilateral ties between the countries in question.

A new Congressional initiative, however, is seeking to change that. The City and State Diplomacy Act, a bipartisan bill recently introduced by representatives Ted Lieu (D-Calif.) and Joe Wilson (R-S.C.), is an effort to give much needed attention and structure to the issue of "sub-state diplomacy." If passed by Congress, the Act would authorize the establishment of a dedicated office under the auspices of the State Department's Undersecretary for Political Affairs to oversee local and municipal diplomatic programs — and to harmonize them with the larger diplomatic outreach efforts underway at Foggy Bottom.

Such an idea is largely new. True, the United States appointed a special representative to build city-to-city relationships back in 2010. But that office was shuttered during the second Obama term, and scant attention has been paid to the issue by the White House since. For instance, the website for CityLinks, a joint effort between USAID and the International City/County Management Association, hasn't been updated since September 2016.

The Lieu-Wilson initiative aims to unify various initiatives (from city-to-city diplomatic outreach to the activities of U.S. mayors abroad) into a broad and coherent framework aimed at advancing national objectives and engagement. It would also help official Washington raise the profile of up-and-coming cities like Pittsburgh, Columbus, or Raleigh, which are often eclipsed on the international stage by places like New York and Los Angeles. That, in turn, would provide foreign audiences with a more representative picture of the United States as a whole.

The Act could also augment the Trump administration's other foreign policy initiatives. The Administration's "Prosper Africa" strategy, unveiled in Mozambique last month, emphasizes America's interest in promoting private business on the African continent. Because African cities are among the fastest growing on the planet — the number of people living in Sub-Saharan African cities is expected to double over the next 25 years, according to the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs — creating an office that directly oversees engagement with these places makes good strategic sense.

In an increasingly urban future, the political action will increasingly be situated in the world's cities. The United States needs to have the proper bureaucracy to engage, interact with and influence foreign audiences in those places. If passed, the City and State Diplomacy Act will help official Washington begin to do so.

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