

Effective City Diplomacy Inspired by Corporate Diplomacy: A European Perspective

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Abstract

City Diplomacy, with its relational and global communicative components, becomes a strong link in the chain of extending the diplomatic mindset and performative practice in a social context, thus responding to societal expectations. Some lessons from Corporate Diplomacy as a policy valorizing sociability and interactionism provide assertive guidance to overcome the challenges to global City power. This Practitioner's Essay is building on diplomatic experience to outline innovative tendencies in contemporary practice and the effectiveness of Corporate Diplomacy as the Cities' soft power for cooperative solutions with regard to core global issues. The COVID pandemic serves as an example for city health diplomacy.

Keywords: City Diplomacy, non-state actors, evolution of diplomacy, elements of diplomatic practice, Corporate Diplomacy, global management

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Cities as Global Actors

In the last years, cities have been flexing their economic and political muscles to gain increasing prominence on the world stage (Curtis & Acuto, 2018). With their own foreign policies, they engage in city-based diplomatic activities and even secure a more formal voice in multilateral affairs (Amiri & Sevin, 2020).

Cities develop local diplomatic initiatives in the general interest that seek to translate their increasing importance and growing capabilities into influencing a new form of 21st century urban governance. The international agenda of global cities' concerns includes the most pressing problems of world politics, such as climate threat, public health, urban security, transnational terrorism, refugee settlement, financial and environmental regulations, transport, but also income distribution and gender equality. Their manifold objectives range from city branding to brokering international agreements and providing creative local solutions in the face of global challenges which the international community of states finds itself increasingly deficient to efficiently govern. Cities remain an enabler for a country's values and human rights, harmonizing the universal moral good with local self-interests.

Cities are not signing international treaties, nor do they have regular embassies. However, cities can engage in all kinds of negotiations, and impact on world politics. They form their networks, practice dialogues with foreign counterparts, attend meetings with heads of state, facilitate public diplomacy, identify, and share best practices and encourage collaboration between international private and public entities (Amiri & Dossani, 2019).

Cities are at the frontline where foreign publics come to interact with a country and its people. State public diplomacy activities are run through or by city administrations (Amiri & Sevin, 2020). These efforts are sometimes parallel to traditional state diplomacy, they often engage with state authorities, some are even multilaterally recognized by the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Others could be in competition or contrary to state activities or—in cases of unrecognized states (Taiwan, Palestine, Catalonia)—provide a functional substitute for national diplomacy. Embracing and enhancing city diplomacy does not necessarily mean undermining state diplomacy. In our globalized, fast-paced, and hyper-connected world, involving city networks in national and international decision-making processes could also be the beginning of strategic delegation of diplomatic tasks and responsibilities to cities – as a form of democracy of action (Amiri & Dossani, 2019). State governments should also place their diplomats in cities to coordinate these activities. The City & State Diplomacy Act introduced in the US Congress in October 2021 even suggests the institutionalization of such coordination in a Subnational Diplomacy Office in the Department of State (Leffel *et al.*, 2021). This office would lend Foreign Service Officers to municipal and state governments to build their diplomatic capacity and initiate a dialogue between conventional and city diplomats (Pipa & Bouchet, 2020).

The German Federal Foreign Office, which has experience with city diplomacy within its International Diplomatic Training (Bouchet, 2022), has put this topic also on the agenda of

the Annual Ambassadors Conference in September 2022 in Berlin. The follow-up of this Conference could mark a stepping stone for the future practice of City Diplomacy.

In their diplomatic activities, cities rely on the soft power of transnational municipal networks leading coalitions of public, private, and civic entities towards specific urban governance outcomes—rather than on sovereign forms of power (Davidson et al., 2019). The emergence of these international collaborative networks involves extensive engagement with the private sector, among them digital networks. This collaboration with transnational private worlds is increasingly crucial to addressing global challenges which transcend national borders and the capacities or the political will of state governments. The transnational forms of networked urban governance reflect the blending of the public and the private (Davidson *et al.*, 2019). In some cases, the private sector can even play the role of initiator and facilitator of such city networking efforts. This type of privatization of city diplomatic activities takes on an entrepreneurial character and a soft institutionalization of public/private relations.

The conduct of international relations by representative of cities (City Diplomacy) can as well be perceived as an indication of an erosion and localization of foreign policy, a crisis of representation, an encroachment on the supremacy of state sovereignty and the power of hierarchies, the constitutional principle of subsidiarity as well as an important structural shift in the foundations of international society.

City Diplomacy: Aims, Tools, and Procedures

City diplomacy can be seen as local governments' actions intended to increase the cities' global profile and interests. Cities collaborate and cooperate in order to solve common global issues, they create diplomatic links by city-twinning, city networking and smart city concepts for the goals of knowledge development in cultural and business relations (Amiri & Sevin, 2020).

The rise of functionally driven City Diplomacy with its soft power potential for pushing human and humanistic concerns to the forefront of international politics generates a capacity to engage and influence sustainable problem-solving. In a time of unprecedented global disturbances, common challenges and threats, City Diplomacy could even strengthen the role of human intelligence in international relations and human solidarity for collective responses to conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.

So far, very little empirical and academic attention has focused on the tools, modus operandi of human-centered City Diplomacy and the principles it embodies, other than the occasional policy opportunism (Hachigian, 2019; Mursitama & Lee, 2018; Beall & Adam, 2017) and “the mimicking of international practices...by borrowing from a playbook of strategies and rituals long practiced by states in international relations” (Gongadze, 2019, p. 9). Some attempts have been made to “harmoniously harness” the European Union’s City Diplomacy along the following principled recommendations: “local affairs first”, “counterbalancing the center” and “opportunism needs structure” (Parkes, 2020, p. 7).

Its decision-making processes and outcomes nevertheless lack an international legitimizing strategic foundation. This could be found in the civilizing virtues of a mindset of thinking and acting diplomatically within a shared space of functionality, responding to changing expectations on diplomacy as a societal practice. “Societal diplomacy” and the underlying shifting from state rights to human rights is supplemented by a movement from state sovereignty to popular sovereignty taking into account the participatory role of the people and their perceptions, expectations and commitments. Although traditional approaches to the practice of statecraft focus on a reasoned calculation of interests, the essence of the more-than-rational nature of diplomacy performed by human beings for human beings, ensuring human security and global public goods (Solana, 2020), lies in the art of influencing. Diplomacy today requires a major focus shift to a new unit of analysis and action: human beings, making the individual the main beneficiary of policy (Solana, 2020) and foremost building relationships rather than putting transaction into the center. The essence of this strategic-moral or alterity diplomacy (as opposed to exclusive power diplomacy with “national interest first”) acknowledges the other’s moral universe (claims and grievances) in order to peacefully search for and engage in common goals through social interaction (Bolewski, 2021). Policy operates in response to the demands of society for effectiveness and efficiency in its actions, depending on the social circumstances and expectations of the general public. Policy success is a social construct which reflects existing interests and power relations in a specific time, space, and culture context.

This movement corresponds with another paradigm shift of sovereignty: from territoriality (and exclusive authority) to mindset, functional connectivity, and specific identity (Bolewski, 2017). Today, there is ever more diplomacy in civil society and more of the civil society is found in City Diplomacy.

A reference to the established concept of Corporate Diplomacy practiced by transnational corporations could provide the necessary orientation knowledge, competence, and practical lessons for the future of cities, if we treat the city as a corporate entity capable of actorhood and agency for change in global affairs (Gordon, 2018) in order to manage the unconsidered. A suggestion of an alignment of city governance with “urban entrepreneurialism” is made by McGuirk *et al.* (2021) who examine how municipal state roles and practices are being refashioned and reoriented. Corporate Diplomacy could provide the appropriate linkage between the “entrepreneurial state” and the “urban entrepreneurialism” and serve as the instrument for “inter-urban diplomacy” (Lauermann, 2018) in foreign policy matters.

Corporate Diplomacy as Soft Power Influence for Cities

International society is in demand of content-sensitive orientation knowledge to reassess, adjust and accommodate diplomacy’s essentials (human factor interdependency and interactions: diplomacy for good) to new expectations of the public sphere (Bolewski, 2017). This requires an opening through reflexive consciousness towards the values and cultures of diplomatic engagement and negotiations. Decision-makers should learn to think and act

responsibly *through the middle* of conflictual situations (Conway, 2020a, 2020b; Manfredi Sánchez *et al.*, 2017), thus managing politics into the future *through* diplomacy. At the tipping point, such a paradigm shift of mindset and thinking will create a “diplomatic watershed moment” in the management process for public/private partnering aiming at compromise and consensus building as major accomplishments (Hare, 2020).

Reappraising its moral and civilizing virtues, a socially embodied diplomacy—not tied solely to the state—could become a form of “third culture” (Bolewski, 2008; Leira, 2017): a societal diplomacy with and through human relational practices (Qin, 2020). This encounter with Self and Other (Kuus, 2017) can even lead to a process of diplomatic social bonding among actors (Holmes & Wheeler, 2020). Such a form of Everyday Diplomacy (Constantinou, 2015; Salacuse, 2013; Sennett, 2012) applies also to the ways individuals and communities (transnational companies, cities, as well as NGOs) engage with and influence decisions about world affairs (Marsden *et al.*, 2016).

Amiri (2022, p. 91) regrets that “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.” Even though her five functions of city diplomacy do not explicitly mention the diplomatic mindset or the appropriate innovative approaches, she nevertheless admits, that “a better understanding of the role of non-state actors (including international companies) as actors in city diplomacy would be insightful” (p. 94). The diplomatic arena has become a hybrid with actors of a diverse set of backgrounds. With the democratization and societization of diplomacy in the conduct of foreign policy, they have all been accepted and given access to the diplomatic arena since in the current global governance, governments need these new actors in order to deal with global challenges (Kiss & Ruël, 2022). In the same line of thought, Bouchet (2022) proposes that “diplomatic instruments of national governments must evolve to enable more collaboration, dialogue and mutual reinforcements with local governments” (p. 97).

A nascent knowledge area turning into an innovative management practice (Falcão *et al.*, 2021) has developed over the last decades as a missing link, dealing with geopolitical and non-commercial risks in international relations by sharing social/societal responsibilities among government and business: the concept of **Corporate Diplomacy** (White, 2020).

Corporate Diplomacy: A Governance Compass for Multiplex Turbulences

Confronted with social and environmental demands international business enterprises, seen as “private public entities”, are requested to get involved in issues of public concern by providing public goods and co-creating more just and peaceful co-existing societies. State actors might even delegate public functions to private business actors for their occasional or continued commitment (institutional business power).

International diplomacy provides the tools for corporate conflict management (Melin, 2021; Hoffmann, 2014). In tackling global challenges, corporations are becoming diplomatic

co-actors in the trade of diplomacy and acquiring access to the diplomatic arena (Lima, 2020; Ruël, 2020). Thus, multinational corporations are to be acknowledged both as objects and actors in diplomatic processes and international affairs (Sevin & Karaca, 2016). Operating in an increasingly complex and volatile environment, transnational corporations experience the rising importance of the diplomatic mindset and practices as relational communication management into the future. To navigate the ship of business through these challenges, it is imperative that global corporations integrate corporate diplomacy as governance compass into their strategic planning to successfully match the liabilities that come with operating in a foreign market (Doherty, 2014). When corporate diplomacy activities (Naray & Bezençon, 2017) are aiming at economically as well as socially sustainable business solutions, they can—at the same time—improve the public perception of companies’ legitimacy in society (social credit) by practicing political influence and filling government gaps (Mogensen, 2019, 2020). This perceived legitimacy and performance-proven trust capital will also accredit them as political actors and civil society representatives.

The essence of contemporary diplomatic practice consists of managing situational and contextual ambivalence and harmonizing divergent interests and expectations within a holistic approach of emotional, social, and intercultural intelligence (e.g., Chancellor Merkel’s open-door policy for migrants in 2015, with legitimations such as humanity and Germany’s rehabilitation of reputation and historical redemption as part of nation branding; see Bolewski, 2021).

Such an inventive mindset of management makes use of the essentially civilizing mission and typical social practices reflecting the contemporary humanist approach to people-centered alterity diplomacy (Zaharna, 2019, p. 126) as a comprehensive problem-solving device. The altering nature and role of diplomacy provides possibilities to influence or steer in certain directions the rapidly changing “sociosphere” by engaging in the social dimensions of contemporary issues (Criekemans, 2014).

From a lifelong diplomatic practitioner’s perception, the following are the five essential elements of the practice of diplomacy:

1. Multilogue (person-to-person contact, face-to-face conversation), networking, proactive engagement
2. Emotional cognition and dynamics (perception management), empathy, sensitivity for the other, discretion and humility
3. Dealing with uncertainties through ethically principled pragmatism (Bjola, 2018), the culture and logic of compromise and consensus
4. Mutual restraint for the sake of harmonization and sustainability (as ideal modes of governance and source of legitimacy)
5. Awareness of the context of global issues with their contrasting economic, ecological, cultural, and social dimensions.

These are the basics of diplomatic tradecraft, prioritizing constructive inducement, incentive pragmatism and emotional intelligence for problem-solving over the present widespread misuse of coercive and punitive usurpation and militarization of diplomacy. To build back public confidence in these competences they must be understood and practiced creatively in their broadest sense encompassing not only skills and expertise, claiming authority and efficacy, but also ethical values, such as moral judgment, humility, and empathy.

A practical guide to successful diplomacy in crisis modus as well as examples for this practice of diplomacy can be found in the author's previous publications (e.g., minilateralism = smallest possible number of actors for problem-solving; ad hoc diplomacy = issue-related coalitions of the willing; diplomatic freezing = agree to disagree on some topics in order to advance on others, see Bolewski, 2018, 2019).

Corporate Diplomacy provides the soft power for all non-state diplomatic actors, such as multinationals, NGOs and even cities (Sevin, 2021), to increase their activities and follow their own agenda in the international arena as well as to engage in providing solutions to global problems such as climate threat, not only as a matter of politics, but of survival. Especially in these commonalities, which are best treated by multilateralism City Diplomacy, can play a significant role (Koranyi, 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020).

This symbiotic relationship between corporate and government actors creates a synergy between the private and public spheres through a "Privatized Diplomacy" (Hocking, 2004; Shepherd, 2016). With the further extension into a triangular pattern of relations between public, private and civic entities, this privatization could pave the way for reshaping their operating environment in a new, non-calculative social (and even moral) contract (Monteiro & Meneses, 2015).

It should take the form of an unconventional deliberative "multilogue" among all concerned on vital (important as well as urgent) societal issues, without tabooing necessary redefinitions, adjustments, transformations and reordering of the traditional dogma of priorities and social practices including de-prioritizations, such as putting societal needs above individualistic comforts ("epochal change"), calling out and marking, harmonizing and mediating between actors from different spheres and interests, moving towards a more human-centered economy of production and consumption with a shared sense of what change is needed and how to secure it (Bolewski, 2021). Developing social expectations require a change in the hierarchy of values in a society, in which economic growth is not the absolute priority, and thereby in society's perception of what is important (Mogensen, 2022). There is no going back to the way everything was before.

Lessons from the COVID Pandemic for City Health Diplomacy

Beyond historical examples of municipal foreign policy movements (Leffel, 2018) and recent cases of Corporate Diplomacy implementation (Bolewski, 2021), a new role for cities in the management of global health diplomacy is emerging: city health diplomacy.

In a COVID-World, the quest for the status quo ante cannot be the compass; and socially conscious and responsible capitalism will be best survived with the inclusion of transnational solidarity, empathy, a practical duty for societal due diligence and humanist care. One lesson of COVID capitalism, moving from crisis to opportunity, while accelerating societal trends, is that business needs a strongly engaged government in all its forms, and vice versa, to solve upcoming problems with a sense of shared responsibilities.

The role of city health diplomacy is to build alliances for health within a city administration and negotiate with city's social, public and private stakeholders, network with other cities and in multilevel governance through political and administrative actions. A city can make a significant diplomatic step towards defining its own branding by hosting the signing of a policy document that advocates its peculiar strategy of policy for health (Honsell *et al.*, 2017).

Cities need to establish more and more alliances with other government tiers at national and international levels with a sense of whole-of-government, whole-of-society, and health-in-all-policies approaches. City health diplomacy is also functional in pursuing equity with respect to future generations, since societies can be healthy only if equitable, because even the privileged are worse off in a less equitable society. Global catastrophes like COVID-19 or other future contagions demonstrate the urgency for public-private partnerships in solidarity. Solidarity with regard to vaccine justice at a global level should mean for countries to contribute resources according to their economic strength and abilities and to receive vaccines depending on needs, risks, population size and medical care, thus reducing structural inequalities and combating poverty and discrimination for a more just society in a “moral community” (Mogensen, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis presents a turning point for legitimate global urban governance amid universal systemic disruptions and provides a key opportunity to accelerate city co-operation by demonstrating their problem-solving role (Acuto *et al.*, 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020).

This pandemic has molded our political, economic and social worlds relentlessly and created new modalities for a “covidization” of governance (PARISS, 2020). COVID-19 has shaken things up and cleared the way for a social revival, rebalancing society towards addressing common problems and moving the norm-based world (dis-)order towards an alternative needs-based system as a common referential and future criterion for international legitimacy. Since in today's geopolitics traditional diplomacy is challenged by technological change, the rise of distrust and the perception of inequality, the practice of emotional intelligence and empathy (Bolewski & Sandu, 2021) become more important for political leaders than before the pandemic.

Cities should improve their diplomatic skills in connection to health promotion and fully exploit its potential by encouraging innovation, creative thinking, mindfulness, and actionable problem-solving capacities to make cities more humane (Honsell *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusions and Further Research

In view of multiplex interconnected turbulences in our disruptive world, polycentric governance (social by nature and geo-political and –economical in function) needs an appropriate compass for the business/government nexus in an increasingly horizontal society and an Open Government Partnership (Manfredi Sánchez *et al.*, 2017). Over the past decades the conceptual breakthrough of Corporate Diplomacy has gained considerable traction in academia as well as in business practice as a strategic communication management tool into the future (Haynal, 2013). The novelty practice of Corporate Diplomacy could provide the soft power for cities as cooperative partners for solutions to core global problems (Sevin, 2021).

On the basis of the extending multi-layered societal diplomacy, Cities should invest and focus on research in this model of international governance and draw the outlined lessons and competences from the concept of Corporate Diplomacy to meet the social and economic challenges of our times by addressing and mitigating the global public and transnational threats to humanity's shared destiny, such as climate disruptions, forced migration and global health turbulences; thus playing an alternative or complementary role in metro-and cosmopolitan dynamics.

More research is called for to gain further insight into diplomatic working methods and any transformative impact (see White & Bolewski, in press). This includes the following research questions:

What form of Diplomacy should cities operate on? What are the guiding principles for their diplomatic activities? Are they acting in a legal vacuum or can cities diplomatic practices be based on the traditional legal definitions of (state) diplomatic functions of Article 3 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961 (representation; protection; negotiation; promotion of interests) or are they grounded in the essence of contemporary diplomatic practice (psychological mindset and appropriate behavior of societal, humanist Diplomacy on the basis of values and principles (see Bolewski, 2019)? Which are the specific principles and values, innovations and improvements City Diplomacy can provide in diplomatic style and substance to these fundamental elements, or are cities just emulating and replicating (state) diplomatic practices for improved multilevel governance? How do the different overlapping state and urban levels coexist in a complex diplomatic regime?

The harmonization of foreign policy among all state-and non-state actors along these operational guidelines would strengthen the efficiency of one-voice diplomatic governance.

Actual progress does not happen automatically, it requires creative and determined leadership to move it along. Shared vision and motivation among foreign policy makers and their diplomatic assemblages could mobilize the appropriate sustainable solutions for future challenges aggravated by their uncertainty, complexity, and acceleration. Such cooperation as integral part of global governance (Kurz, 2022)—better coordinating with other international actors as well as better societal awareness (Marchetti, 2021)—requires constant care and

persistence, since (previously unthinkable) political change is known to be slow, non-hierarchical, and non-linear.

In a relational transnational sphere with global power shifts among traditional and new actors, it is time to think and act with a diplomatic approach. Diplomacy avails itself as a set of universal principles (hyper-norms) to fill global governance gaps. This approach applies equally for policy-and society minded scholars as well as for orientation knowledge savvy practitioners.

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