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SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE UNITED STATES: a practice that is still expanding

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From a certain relevance in the second half of the 20th century, albeit episodic and with a domestic focus, subnational diplomacy in the United States has moved with the new millennium towards fresh, more complex and sophisticated, multi-actor frameworks that have greater potential impact. They are frameworks in which certain philanthropic organisations, the private sector, highly influential think tanks and academia carry considerable weight.

Today, Ambassador Nina Hachigian, US special representative for city and state diplomacy, leads a strategy looking to gain influence in the State Department and thus make subnational governments key components of the United States' diplomatic machinery. It remains to be seen how the strategy will evolve, all the more so with the prospect of Donald Trump on the horizon.

At a moment strongly marked by a reshaping of the global order and by fierce competition between the United States and China, subnational diplomacy is taking on an increasingly significant role. In a world that is urbanising at breakneck speed, especially in the Global South, cities play a key role in addressing some of the main economic and social transformations underway. We cannot understand the processes of green and

digital transition, the reconfiguration of the model of production or new inequalities without placing cities at the centre of the equation.

Today metropolises like New York, Paris, London, Tokyo or Shanghai are among the planet's biggest economies. We cannot understand Latin America without São Paulo, Mexico City or Buenos Aires; Africa without Johannesburg, Cairo or Lagos; the Asia Pacific region without Seoul, Sidney or Singapore; North America without Los Angeles, Chicago or Toronto; or Europe without Berlin, Amsterdam, Vienna or Barcelona. Cities amass political and economic power, creativity and talent; their governments have growing regulatory capacity, they promote rights and drive solutions in critical areas such as mobility, housing or tackling multiple forms of inequality or fragmentation.

All that has positioned them as recognised and increasingly visible actors in the system of international relations. Dynamic and innovative actors that – even on a stage still monopolised by nation states – foster alliances and join forces to influence international agendas, reach out in search of economic opportunities, create spaces for the exchange of knowledge or build solidarity networks in complex environments. Mayors and their teams interact by networking to meet the common challenges ahead of them.

The transformative potential of cities and their capacity to link up globally has not gone unnoticed by the world's major powers. In Europe, the cradle of the international municipal movement, the European Union (EU) has forged an alliance with local governments over decades. It has served to open spaces of collaboration and exchange in practically every region of the world. Since the 1990s, Brussels has

promoted various financial programmes to accompany cities in some of the main challenges they face, boosting their capabilities and recognising them as key actors for sustainable development. Yet, and while in recent months there has been talk of the need to localise the **Global Gateway**,¹ European support for the various expressions of subnational diplomacy appears to be losing steam (Fernández de Losada and Galceran-Vercher, 2023).

Several analysts have also turned the spotlight on the growing importance of cities and urbanisation processes in China's global outreach (Curtis and Klaus, 2023). Indeed, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the cornerstone of the Asian giant's expansionism, has found clear expression in many cities around the world.

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The huge investments made by China to develop critical infrastructure in urban environments of Asia, Africa and Latin America – in Europe too – are testament to that. At the same time, Chinese subnational diplomacy is increasingly dynamic and forges ties in every region of the planet, while it is securing a major presence in some of the main networks operating globally.

Given the situation, the United States has been trying to position itself in the global urban ecosystem for some years now. Although it has not always been the case, as we shall see in this paper, the big US cities and some of the states today boast a strong international footprint. It is a presence marked by globalisation, by high impact agendas like the climate or migration and by an inrush of certain hugely influential philanthropic organisations. US subnational diplomacy is built on a well-crafted narrative, on instruments aimed at strengthening its capabilities and on a connection to the country's foreign policy that it is hoped will only grow stronger.

Trade diplomacy and "municipal foreign policy"

For many years, the weight of US subnational diplomacy has not matched the clout the country has wielded and continues to wield in the global order. In the second half of the 20th century, in the period from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War, the frames of reference guiding the action of the country's subnational governments were essentially domestic. Local and national affairs prevailed over the foreign

outlook within a mindset that could be described as insular. Yet an analysis of the external action of the country's subnational governments through those years provides some clues that should be taken into consideration. We can observe activity that might be defined as episodic and which, while significant in some periods, remained on the relative margins of the dynamics of the international municipal movement of the day. Cities and states forged external ties, but the focus was on matters of local importance such as trade and attracting foreign investors or promoting values that were important to the community like peace, safeguarding human rights and solidarity.

While the US municipal movement can be traced to the first expressions of international municipalism in the 1920s, the country's first subnational diplomacy milestone came in 1956 with the launch of the **Sister Cities International** (SCI) platform. Spearheaded initially by President Eisenhower, since its inception the initiative has promoted the establishment of thousands of bilateral cooperation relations between US cities and counties and their counterparts in countries around the globe. SCI facilitates technical cooperation missions and exchange and promotes human rights and peace projects, as well as community ties and volunteer programmes. The organisation operates in a domestic framework, however, and has little connection with similar bodies in other regions of the world.

By the 1980s, a good many US states and cities had dispatched trade delegations and representatives for attracting foreign investment. Cities such as Tokyo (with 19 delegations in 1982), London, Brussels or Frankfurt hosted over 60 permanent offices run by 33 states and some cities, like New York, in more than 70 countries around the world (Duchacek, 1984). According to the National Governors' Association,² in 1981 American states invested more in promotional activity than the federal government's own Department of Commerce. Municipal associations joined the push, mounting promotional campaigns and events like those organised by the **US Conference of Mayors** in Zurich and Hong Kong in 1982 and 1983, respectively, under the slogan "Invest in America's Cities" (ibid.).

Arguably the standout subnational diplomacy initiative in the latter stages of the last century, however, was what the **Center for Innovative Diplomacy (CID)** based in Irvine, California, called "municipal foreign policy".

1. The Global Gateway is the EU's main foreign investment strategy.

2. "Committee on International Trade and Foreign Relations, Export Development and Foreign Investment: The Role of the States and its Linkage to Federal Action". Washington, DC: National Governors' Association (1981), p. 1.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, several US cities and states challenged the federal government's policies in Central America or South Africa or aligned with global movements against nuclear proliferation. Cities such as Burlington, New Jersey; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; or Rochester, New York, mobilised against the Reagan administration's support for the anti-communist and counterrevolutionary forces operating in Central America. They did so by aligning with significant sectors of their own communities, raising funds to help twinned cities and offering the thousands of Central American refugees living across the US a safe place (Leffel, 2018), a movement that formed the root of the sanctuary cities.

At the same time, and given the federal administration's apparent indifference, a significant number of US cities took a stand against the South African government's apartheid policies. As many as 59 cities, and some states and counties, passed legislation banning investment in South Africa, which had an impact calculated at over \$450bn (Spiro, 1986). Likewise, the 160 or more cities that declared themselves Nuclear Free Zones (NFZ) mobilised against the federal government, legislating to ban the manufacture of nuclear weapons components in their areas. It was a matter of conviction, but also a reaction to the Reagan administration's decision to divert federal funds initially earmarked to support local policies to the defence budget in order to step up the nuclear race with the Soviet Union (Leffel, 2018).

Despite the notable, though episodic, dynamism of US subnational diplomacy, however, there was a glaring absence of the big cities from some of the main debates and processes taking place within the international municipal movement. They had only a minor presence at what were considered key events like the **Earth Summit**, which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, or the **Habitat II** conference, held in Istanbul in 1996, where the first World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities (WACLA) was also staged. Moreover, they carried no weight in the organisations comprising what was known as the G4+,³ formed at the time to ensure communication with the United Nations in the process of implementing the agreements reached in the Turkish capital. This irrelevance goes some way to explaining the inability to halt the veto that the United States imposed, along with China and other countries, on the World Charter of Local Self-Government.⁴

Similarly, they were also inconspicuous in the key organisations of the day. While the **National League of Cities** and the US Conference of Mayors formed part of the **International Union of Local Authorities** (IULA), the country's big cities were not with their counterparts around the world in the main platforms that brought them together: the World Federation of United Cities (FMCU),⁵ Summit⁶ or **Metropolis**. Moreover, although they did join the **International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives** (ICLEI) six years after its establishment in 1990, they played no part in the process that developed into the founding in 2004 of **United Cities and Local Governments** (UCLG),⁷ the world's main municipal organisation, the president of which at the time was the mayor of Paris and whose first executive bureau included the mayor of South Bay, a municipality of 4,700 inhabitants in Florida.

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Globalisation, climate activism and philanthropy as catalysts of a subnational diplomacy for the 21st century

As numerous authors have noted (Sassen, 2005; Curtis, 2018), the process of neoliberal globalisation following the fall of the Berlin Wall positioned global cities as connecting nodes of a new world order, with the United States as the hegemonic power. Cities such as New York, Los Angeles or Chicago, along with their counterparts around the world, burst onto the international scene as key components of the machine driving flows of capital, goods, services and knowledge. They were also integral to some of the main challenges that globalisation presented.

Against this backdrop, the climate emergency arose as a global challenge with major urban implications and a huge capacity to mobilise the international community. The challenge reshaped the frameworks through which urban diplomacy operated to a large extent, pivoting it towards a multistakeholder, more complex and sophisticated structure with greater potential impact. Indeed, the fight against climate change prompted

Local Implementation of the Habitat Agenda, including The Role Of Local Authorities". HS/C/18/3/Add.1 23 (November 2000).

3. Consisting of the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), the World Federation of United Cities, Metropolis, the Summit of the World's Major Cities (Summit) and other regional organisations.

4. "Follow-up to The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II):

5. Founded in 1957 in Aix-les-Bains, France, and made up of twinned cities throughout the world.

6. Summit Conference of Major Cities of the World (Summit). New York was the only US city in this network established in 1985 and which ceased to exist in 2005.

7. UCLG came about from the merger of the IULA and the FMCU.

an alliance between the major cities of the world and some of the biggest (and chiefly US) philanthropic organisations and think tanks. The alliance partly explains the rise of US subnational diplomacy. It has also brought the international municipal movement closer to the prevailing political, economic, social and cultural frames of reference in America.

In 2005, the then mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, championed the creation of **C40**, an alliance among big cities across the globe that decided to share strategies for combating climate change. The organisation, a key component of US urban diplomacy,⁸ has a considerable capacity to influence the global climate agenda. One of its defining characteristics has been its ability to combine vision, strategy and action not just among mayors, but also with the big US philanthropic

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organisations and with the private sector. In 2006, the network expanded with the support of the **Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI)** and since 2011 it has received continuous backing from **Bloomberg Philanthropies**. In addition, C40 is strongly committed to encouraging public-private collaboration, putting companies and research centres developing solutions in contact with cities that require them. It has also helped to create new mechanisms connected to today's multiple expressions of multilateralism. A good example of that is **the U20**, the space that C40 convenes with UCLG through which the world's major cities – US cities too – try to get their priorities on the G20 agenda.

Other platforms such as **Resilient Cities Network** or the **Global Covenant of Mayors (GCoM)** operate on very similar lines. The former, promoted by the Rockefeller Foundation since 2013, puts the focus on supporting cities in devising their climate resilience plans. It is an issue that concerns cities in the United States, which make up the biggest section of the network with 26 members. The latter, the GCoM, focuses on city leadership in promoting and developing local climate action and energy transition plans. It brings together thousands of cities from across the world, 185 of which are in the US. It also introduces a new factor by combining the leadership of an executive board made up of mayors, co-chairs resulting from an alliance between the European Commission and the philanthropist and former mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, and

representatives of the chief United Nations agencies working in this field and the main city networks. Over the years, however, the multi-partner approach has moved beyond climate action to other areas in which US cities are very active. A good example of that is the **Mayors Migration Council**, a platform funded by **Open Society Foundations**, among others, comprising over 200 cities throughout the world, 40 of which are in the United States. Its goal is to position them in the global debates on migration.

Today, cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Houston or Boston are among the most dynamic global urban diplomacy operators. They have ties with cities throughout the world, they are present in the major urban multilateralism spaces and they participate in the main networks. On this latter

point, however, it is worth noting that US municipalism continues to have a very limited presence in the traditional European-rooted networks, those that have their origins in the municipal

movement of the 20th century. It is almost exclusively committed to the new, multi-stakeholder spaces. It is also worth pointing out that the transition of US and global urban diplomacy to these new formats has been partnered by a cohort of research centres and think tanks largely based in Washington DC and other US cities. The **Brookings Institution**, the **Chicago Council on Global Affairs** the **German Marshall Fund** or, more recently, the **Truman Center for National Policy** have shown exceptional vision in crafting a narrative that justifies and accompanies the country's cities in their international action. Today, the United States and its academia set the standard and lead the production of knowledge – applied knowledge too – in the field of subnational diplomacy.

US State Department support: much ado about nothing?

A good part of this narrative constructed at the desks of some of the country's main think tanks has prompted the federal government to step up and accompany cities and states in their diplomatic efforts. The aim is not only to boost their capacity to make an impact, but also to harness all their assets and potential to complement US foreign and security policy, which is now more inclusive and diverse, though also more complex. But this is not a new strategy. In 1978, during the Carter administration, an office was created and tasked with managing ties with local and state governments in the Department of State. Led by Ambassador at Large **W. Beverly Carter Jr**, the office was short-lived and scrapped in January 1981, following Ronald Reagan's election as president. Its functions were passed from

8. The United States is home to 14 of the 96 cities that comprise the C40. US mayors have also chaired this platform on two occasions: Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York (2010-2013) and Eric Garcetti, mayor of Los Angeles (2019-2021).

department to department and sidelined for over 30 years until 2010, during the first Obama administration, when the State Department once again committed to forging closer ties with cities and states through the Office of the Special Representative for Global Intergovernmental Affairs, headed by **Reta Jo Lewis**.

The approach had a clear logic. A significant number of the agreements the US government adopts in the United Nations and other multilateral agencies require other stakeholders such as civil society organisations, the private sector or local authorities in order to be implemented (Klaus and Singer, 2018). The agendas linked to sustainable development promoted between 2012 and 2016 are a good illustration of that, and the State Department was a committed actor. The US government played a prominent role in key fora for cities such as COP21 in 2015, where the **Paris Agreement on climate change** was reached, or the Habitat III Conference that took place in Quito in 2016, when the **New Urban Agenda** was approved. The election of Donald Trump at the end of that year, however, put an end to the United States' engagement with the United Nations, multilateralism, the climate agenda and cities. In fact, it ushered in an era marked by climate denial, international isolationism and confrontation with the urban world and progressive elites. Given this backdrop, it is significant that various operators, from think tanks to members of Congress, continue to advocate for reconnecting with subnational diplomacy and institutionalising it through legislative action to safeguard it against subsequent political changes.

Institutions as important as the **Council on Foreign Relations** or the Truman Center for National Policy are of that opinion. The former released a **paper in 2017** advising the Trump administration to reinstate a specialised office and tap the full potential of the country's subnational diplomacy. The latter, for its part, convened a high-level group of experts **which published a report in 2022** that not only called for the re-establishment of an office, but also backed mapping assets, expanding the capacity of cities and states to make an impact abroad and strengthening the alliances with think tanks and philanthropic organisations that had proven so successful. President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken were receptive and that same year they named Nina Hachigian as Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy. It was no anodyne appointment. Apart from being a career ambassador, she was deputy mayor for international relations for the city of Los Angeles, a beacon of US urban diplomacy. The appointment has not gone unnoticed in the international community, with the ambassador cutting a visible and recognisable figure.

She has attended high-level fora, both in the field of multilateralism (such as COP28 held in Dubai, the High-Level Political Forum in New York or the Munich Security Conference, all in 2023) and in the sphere of international municipalism in its multiple expressions. She has also reinforced ties with the country's main cities and states, as well as with the diplomatic corps, multilateral bodies, philanthropic organisations, think tanks, specialised research centres and the private sector.

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Yet, and despite the launch of such significant initiatives as the **Cities Summit in Denver**, bringing together mayors from across the Western Hemisphere in 2023 in an excellent exercise of political dialogue, or the **Cities Forward programme**, a nascent though promising support instrument for technical cooperation among cities, the reality is that Special Representative Hachigian works with very limited budgetary and professional resources and still occupies a periphery position in the State Department. Her team belongs to the Office of Global Partnerships and has yet to achieve full recognition. In fact, the legislative initiative on subnational diplomacy presented in 2019⁹ and in 2021¹⁰ in Congress has failed to prosper, despite multiple and significant shows of support.

Concluding remarks

US subnational diplomacy has certainly grown in stature over the last few years. The intermittent, episodic and domestic-focused trajectory that characterised it in the second half of the 20th century has developed into an experience that is gradually consolidating and opting for new formats and a weighty agenda. It is an agenda that ties in with some of the chief challenges of globalisation and which connects it to emerging actors that wield considerable influence in the global context. What is more, the narrative underpinning it is a robust one, which places it in the big debates that combine urban issues and global concerns.

Yet, despite the efforts and leadership of the special representative, the actual support the State Department lends to cities and states in their external action appears to be more symbolic than effective. The federal government allocates limited resources and the

9. S.4426 - City and State Diplomacy Act. 116th Congress (2019-2020). Sponsor: Sen. Christopher Murphy.
10. H.R.4526 - City and State Diplomacy Act. 117th Congress (2021-2022). Sponsor: Rep. Ted Lieu.

commitment to subnational diplomacy largely relies on major philanthropists. Thus, against a backdrop of competition for leadership of the global order in which urban issues continue to have considerable importance, advancing and deepening the initial commitment expressed by President Biden and Secretary Blinken makes perfect sense and could bring many rewards. China is on it. Europe was, though it now appears to have turned its attention elsewhere. It remains to be seen where the United States will go, particularly with the prospect of Donald Trump on the horizon.

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