



ISSUE BRIEF

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# Diplomacy for a Diffuse World

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Globalization, urbanization, and fragmentation are reshaping the world order by diffusing power throughout the global system. In order to remain relevant, American diplomacy will require a fundamental retooling that includes a more deliberate and serious engagement with novel forces and actors. America’s leaders must recognize that these forces and actors not only are buffeting foreign nations but also are at work within the United States itself, strengthening the capabilities of American cities, communities, individuals, and networks to reach beyond US borders. Building a stronger partnership between the federal government’s diplomatic community and these nonstate actors will enhance America’s leadership and standing around the world.

## A New World

The National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030* report identified four key megatrends that are driving change within the international system: individual empowerment; diffusion of power; demographic shifts; and the food, water, and energy nexus.<sup>1</sup> Individual empowerment drives these other trends as empowered individuals, and the networks within which they operate, can resolve global problems or, alternatively, destabilize global systems. Individuals, increasingly empowered through technology, social media, wealth, and education, are broadcasting their views, rallying others to their causes, and better coordinating their efforts.

Cities are increasingly important phenomena to these trends. They are incubators for empowerment and demographic shifts, and are the sites where global challenges ranging from climate change and food

<sup>1</sup> US National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (November 2012), <http://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/national-intelligence-council-global-trends>. The *Global Trends 2030* report was released at an Atlantic Council conference in December 2012.

## Strategic Foresight Initiative

The Strategic Foresight Initiative, which strives to forge greater cooperation on futures analysis among its main partners around the world, has rapidly become a hub for an expanding international community of strategic planners in government and the private sector.

In the spring of 2014, the Atlantic Council, in partnership with the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, convened expert roundtables to discuss the implications of a changing world for US public diplomacy. This issue brief is based on discussions with representatives from the Departments of State and Defense, the US Agency for International Development, and experts from academia and private and nonprofit sectors. All have contributed to this brief.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Department of State or the US Government.

security to terrorism, energy security, and poverty are played out. Global urbanization involves billions of people on every inhabited continent (half the world’s population now lives in cities) and will only get bigger over time: by 2050, 70 percent of all people will live in cities.<sup>2</sup>

Urbanization contributes to wealthier, more informed and engaged, and better networked citizenries. Through modern urbanization processes, local issues quickly can become global ones, and vice versa. Highly networked

<sup>2</sup> UK Ministry of Defense, *Global Strategic Trends out to 2045*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (June 2014), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-strategic-trends-out-to-2045>, p.17.

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UNDERSTANDING, INFORMING, ENGAGING, AND INFLUENCING NONSTATE ACTORS, ESPECIALLY AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL, ARE ESSENTIAL MECHANISMS FOR BUILDING SUPPORT AND ENLISTING ADVOCATES ABROAD FOR AMERICAN POLICIES, VALUES, AND INTERESTS.

urban middle classes, for instance, drove mass demonstrations in Turkey and Brazil in 2013; in both cases seemingly trivial local issues (construction planned for Istanbul's Gezi Park, bus fare hikes in Brazil) became flashpoints for larger grievances against the state.<sup>3</sup> Urbanization shifts power within states and between them as well. Noncapital cities like Shanghai, Mumbai, New York, and Sao Paulo have become power centers within the global economic order.

### American Dynamism

The United States appears best positioned to respond to this new world. America's hybrid economic, political, and social systems and its cultural malleability give it enormous flexibility in the face of change. US history, values, culture, and national outlook, conditioned by long exposure to new waves of immigration, position it well to understand and shape the world going forward. Americans are globally engaged people. Americans long have been catalysts for positive change, transmitting their ideals and accomplishments not just through traditional statesmen and presidents but critically via journalists, artists, CEOs, mayors, soldiers, writers, inventors, celebrities, teachers, students, union foremen, designers, and scientists. English is the global language of business, management, science, banking, and entertainment. For all of these reasons, American culture, society, and people exert a global gravitational pull, and others around the world will continue to look to the United States for leadership.

<sup>3</sup> Regina Mennig, "Middle Class Revolts in Turkey and Brazil," *Deutsche Welle*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.dw.de/middle-class-revolts-in-turkey-and-brazil/a-16908025>.

Relative to all other countries, therefore, the US government is in a unique and favorable position to make global public engagement more pervasive in its statecraft. The US diplomatic community has the personnel and the capability, but needs to pay greater attention to how nonstate actors and global megatrends are stretching or even redefining traditional diplomatic boundaries and institutions.

The United States has a certain structure for engaging audiences in foreign countries via traditional and public diplomacy efforts. This structure is no longer perfectly suited for a changing world, as traditional (government-to-government) and public (government-to-people) diplomacy are converging. Similarly, both state and nonstate (and elite and nonelite) actors increasingly matter for US power projection abroad. Nonetheless, America's diplomatic structure possesses multiple strengths that can be adapted to meet new opportunities. For example:

- US government officials cover the world, with over three hundred diplomatic missions or offices globally. Most federal agencies are represented overseas, as are many state and city governments.
- American diplomats sit in positions of respected authority and have access to information and other resources that nongovernment officials do not have. Overseas personnel (American and locally-hired staff) are equipped with the knowledge and background to communicate in the local language and understand the local history and culture to put news and events into context for US policymakers to comprehend.

Despite such strengths, the US diplomatic community does not leverage America's considerable soft power as effectively as it could. US diplomats are critical nodes in global influence networks, but policies and structures need to change to permit a more nimble diplomatic corps to emerge, one that can effectively identify and leverage key nonstate constituencies both at home and abroad. Establishing lasting relationships with key individuals is pivotal as these individuals will assume greater leadership roles in and outside of foreign governments. Forming and maintaining relationships with emerging leaders will enhance receptivity to US overtures and policy in the future. Such relationships also will provide conduits for American policymakers, who can use them to become much better informed of foreign concerns about American policies.

Finally, many local overseas staff (foreign nationals) are willing and eager to work for US embassies and consulates because they believe the best way to improve



The June 2013 protests in Brazil occurred simultaneously with grassroots demonstrations in Istanbul and elsewhere. While all resulted from frustration with specific local and national conditions, at the same time the highly networked participants drew inspiration from parallel movements abroad. *Source:* Agencia Brasil (licensed under Creative Commons).

their countries is by helping the US government understand the local environment. Foreign citizens seek out contact with the US diplomatic community in order to get tangible, often business-related assistance for themselves or their communities. But just as often they seek contact because they are attracted to America’s ideals and culture, and want US diplomats’ help in making contact with American organizations and people.

### Whole of Society

In order to deal with a highly fluid and unbounded reality on the ground, diplomatic strategy and the tools to implement it—including its structures, policies, and resources—need careful reexamination.

The phrase of the moment in Washington is “whole of government,” which means an integrated government approach to achieve national objectives. This phrase actually is too narrow: the United States needs to understand the global challenge in “whole of society” terms. Under this concept, US diplomatic strategy would need to first identify what it is trying to accomplish—its “strategic intent”—then align the many components of the government itself (the “whole of government” idea), then finally identify and recruit actors from nonstate

networks in the United States and abroad that can help achieve its strategic intent. In this formulation, the US government would establish a centralized goal but utilize a decentralized and localized implementation process. Such a process will enable US domestic partners and overseas missions to coordinate across US government agencies and with foreign, nonstate actors on how best to address broader, cross-sectional issues. These issues manifest themselves differently region to region, country to country, and city to city.

Therefore, understanding, informing, engaging, and influencing nonstate actors, especially at the grassroots level, are essential mechanisms for building support and enlisting advocates abroad for American policies, values, and interests. Public diplomacy is one part of a much larger answer.

### Recommendations

With a more comprehensive and focused strategy, American diplomats could harness global trends to better shape the world in service of national interests and the universal ideals behind the American dream. Such a strategy would have the following components:

**Focus more on cities:** Due to increasing urbanization, diplomats need to understand that an excessive focus on capital-to-capital engagement between foreign policy elites misses the critical, even fundamental, importance of municipal-to-municipal interaction. Further, the spatial complexity of cities mean that sectoral approaches to development or security challenges (e.g., water, health, sanitation) rarely make much sense. As many rapidly growing second-, third-, and fourth-tiered cities do not have adequate staffing, budgets, and technological know-how as capital cities, they may be ripe for partnerships with American cities, businesses, and other cross-sectoral exchanges.

The city must become a key unit of analysis and a focal point of diplomacy. Expanding America's connections in foreign cities means American diplomacy must adopt a "whole of society" approach through private- and public-sector partnerships at the national and subnational levels. The US diplomatic community must understand how American cities are linking with foreign cities, both formally (e.g., through mechanisms such as Sister Cities International) and otherwise. Diplomats must systematically engage directly with American state and city governments, US-based nongovernment organizations and businesses, and other civil society organizations, which have developed an independent network of foreign counterparts in noncapital cities. Potentially, these foreign counterparts can support US government efforts to better understand local environments and to jointly develop foreign outreach and engagement strategies.

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Another more radical task is to understand that city governments are diplomatic agents themselves that carry the American banner abroad on their own terms. The US government can enlist the support of US cities to further its own foreign policy goals. The government should consider embedding a State Department Foreign

Service officer in major American city councils or administrations, especially for those American cities whose goals and activities correspond most closely with national foreign and security policy goals. State governments also present an opportunity for engagement abroad. The National Governors Association, for example, could be a good a conduit for developing more systematic partnerships at the subnational level.

**Leverage individual empowerment:** The United States should identify and cooperate with organizations that are focused on themes promoting individual empowerment: education, entrepreneurship, innovation, sustainability, civic involvement, and programs that reach specific audiences such as youth and women. Government personnel in diplomatic agencies, including the Department of Commerce, can help potential sponsors and investors understand local environments and identify partners abroad.

**Maximize convening power:** American diplomats connect diverse US and foreign populations, especially those working on similar themes or goals across sectors. However, much of this is done on an informal, ad hoc basis. Finding ways to more systematically tap into US domestic networks would provide American diplomats with powerful allies and tools with which to engage foreign populations. Through matching domestic and foreign nonstate networks, American diplomats would maximize the US government's already considerable convening power. American and foreign companies, organizations, municipalities, and individuals would benefit from such convening, and would be more likely to recognize the US diplomatic community as a value-adding partner.

Matching appropriate American counterparts with foreign contacts is not always straightforward, especially across diverse fields including media, academia, religion, culture, nonprofit, labor, and science and technology. Americans already working, studying, or living abroad may be willing to serve on remote outreach teams to assist the American diplomatic community in understanding the local environment and engaging local populations. This strategy should be developed more thoroughly to become a more integral component for US foreign policy goals.

**Use data strategically:** The US government can become much more adept at using data. When used appropriately, information and communications technologies (ICT) can be powerful tools to help diplomats understand local conditions and issues as well as inform, connect, engage, and influence local populations. The effectiveness of ICT tools, however,



Apple's flagship store in Shanghai: America's iconic communications technology brand meets China's rising middle class. *Source:* Christian Ortiz (licensed under Creative Commons).

depends on the local context. The government should better understand with whom, where, when, why, and how ICT tools can be used advantageously, when they can backfire, and when they are no substitute for in-person engagement. ICT is not a panacea for fixing deep-seated problems, for instance related to a weak rule of law, limited civil society, lack of transparency in governance, or inadequate infrastructure. Additionally, the competition for ideas in a networked world is fiercer than ever. Attention is a precious commodity, and conversation is still the key to true engagement. Social media connects people in meaningful ways, but personal engagement remains the most effective means for genuine influence.

To understand local environments more comprehensively, the US diplomatic community also needs to think about issues spatially and visually. Comparing dimensionalized maps of cities, countries, and regions will help the United States develop strategies and focus its efforts on target problem areas and the right audience segments. Using data visually will help to create better situational awareness and a clearer understanding of where problems and opportunities lie. Visual data is also more intuitive and compelling and thus a better springboard to raising awareness of issues,

both inside the US diplomatic community and outside as well.

**Become strategic communications experts:** US diplomats need strategies to shape narratives and create experiences that will influence foreign audiences. In the competition of ideas, American brands still resonate in many places but not all of them and not everywhere. These brands include more than just corporate and commercial brands; American individuals, institutions, and even public entities (e.g., the cities of Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago) often are positive global brands. Further, "America" itself is not synonymous with the US government and should not be treated as such. The US government needs to be honest about its credibility as a messenger, recognizing where and when its brand is not strong and finding and enlisting those brands—American or other—that are stronger locally.

The default communication strategy of "one size fits all" must be transformed into a decentralized and localized campaign that segments audiences. Public perceptions are often shaped in cities. Using the big data that cities generate, US diplomats can better identify where public opinion is mobilized and thus improve messaging. The US government should look to the private sector and political campaigns for examples of how to convey

information, promote and manage a brand, and effectively message to increasingly affluent and educated foreign urbanites.

The US government can adopt new approaches to improve its own brand and to leverage others in service of its own. These approaches, borrowed from marketing, include crowdsourcing, co-creation (a business strategy that integrates customers into product development), generating thought leader endorsements of US policy or ideas, information aggregation (where the US government becomes a source for filtering and understanding the flood of online information), curating conversations with those who shape foreign public opinion, and use of entertainment strategies, all done as means for reaching new audiences, creating new relationships, and building on old ones.

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**Review resource alignment:** In terms of organizational reform, the US diplomatic community needs to create a balance between investing resources and staff in embassies versus in consulates in rapidly growing or economically important noncapital cities.<sup>4</sup> Private companies that are restructuring their strategies, operations, and resources around cities may serve as models. A careful review of existing or previous models of US government representation in cities of regional, economic, cultural, or political importance may also be helpful. Such models include the American Presence Post in France, “Route 66” in Brazil, the Outreach Office in

Mission China, and the Provincial Team in Guangzhou. The Department of State’s American Spaces program and its range of models and partnerships may also capture opportunities of engaging in key municipalities and creating city-to-city networks.

### Conclusion

If the US diplomatic community does not adapt its policies, structures, and skillsets to an international system shaped by citizens as much as governments, it will face its own marginalization and weaken its ability to fully understand and shape developments impacting the international system. The current course inhibits America’s ability to build meaningful collaboration with the very people who are likely to change national and global trajectories into the future. But American diplomacy is malleable: it can adapt and even capitalize on new opportunities and thereby maintain continued US global leadership. By seizing the opportunities presented by a new world, the US diplomatic community can increase its ability to shape outcomes that suit America’s interests, reduce threats to its national security, increase opportunities for US business, and build productive ties to Americans and their communities.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dobbs et al., *Urban World: Mapping the Economic Power of Cities* (McKinsey Global Institute, March 2011), [http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/urbanization/urban\\_world](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/urbanization/urban_world), p. 2.

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