City Diplomacy and “Glocal” Governance: The Missing Link in Sustainable Development

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Abstract Diplomacy is in trouble. With globalisation come global problems. While we live in a 21st-century world of interdependence, we face 17th-century Westphalian political institutions with defined boundaries and separated responsibilities of the nation-states. When we think of diplomacy, we are thinking of state-to-state relations; however, the current inter-state system fails to fight many of the world’s fights, which are trans-border in nature, global in scale. While state-to-state dialogues often fall into a “gridlock,” city-to-city networks are working closely together for our common future. Surprisingly, scholars of international relations have largely neglected the role of cities in global governance.

This paper seeks to break what James Rosenau termed the “conceptual jail” of regarding nation-states as the legitimate subject to manage world affairs, and offers a realistic global governance arrangement to bypass the “gridlock” and carry out concrete actions: city diplomacy and “glocal” governance. I will revisit Confucian philosophy da-tong (great unity), Rosenau’s “sovereignty-free” actors and Athenian democracy, and reflect on the cosmopolitan characteristics of cities that are absent in nation-states. With city diplomacy, “trans-municipal networks” (TMNs) transcend nationality for the common good of humanity; with “glocal” governance, citizens have the potential to participate in global policymaking through local institutions. This provides political justifications for TMNs in localising the global agenda and implementing SDGs at city level.

1. Introduction

Diplomacy is in trouble. With globalisation come global problems. While we live in a 21st-century world of interdependence, we face 17th-century Westphalian political institutions with defined boundaries and separated responsibilities of the nation-states. When we think of diplomacy, we are thinking of state-to-state relations; however, the current inter-state system fails to fight many of the world’s fights, which are trans-border in nature, global in scale.

On the one hand, state-to-state dialogues often fall into “gridlock.” Five years ago, at the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP15), 114 heads-of-state gathered in Copenhagen to explain why national sovereignty prevents them to act together on climate change, the common enemy of humanity and the most pressing crisis of our time.¹ As Hale, Held and Young indicate in their recent book, Global Cooperation is

Failing When We Need It Most. On the other hand, international policymaking suffers from “democratic deficits.” Citizens fail to participate in the global decisions that affect their lives through national political institutions. From the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 to Toronto G20 protests in 2010, it is precisely because of such “democratic deficits” that lead to popular opposition on the accountability of state-based international institutions.

In response to the challenges and opportunities of globalisation, David Held offered an answer: cosmopolitan democracy. In essence, political process should extend beyond territorial boundaries and becomes internationalised with a supranational executive and legislature, i.e., “world government.” Although this concept has attracted world-wide academic attention, it has never taken off. Being criticised as radical and utopian, Held’s state-centric proposal provides no realistic policy implications to address the “gridlock” and “democratic deficits.”

This paper has two purposes: (1) to break what Rosenau termed the “conceptual jail” of regarding nation-states as the legitimate subject to manage world affairs, and advocate cities as the agent to implement sustainable development goals (SDGs), and (2) to revisit the condition of cosmopolitan democracy, and offer a realistic global governance arrangement to revitalise the concept while bypassing the infeasibility of world government: city diplomacy and “glocal” governance.

Both diplomacy and democracy finds their origins in cities: the Greek city-states. In fact, the father of the study of global governance James Rosenau hinted the relevance of cities in Governance in the Twenty-first Century, the “founding paper” of the journal Global Governance. However, because of the “state-centric inattentional blindness,” scholars of international relations have largely neglected the role of cities in global governance. Borrowing the literature of “trans-governmental networks,” this paper conceptualises “trans-municipal networks” (TMNs) to fill this theoretical gap and deepen our understanding in the cosmopolitan characteristics and democratic credentials of networked cities. To date, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40) serves as one of the most established TMNs.

In Part I, I will revisit classical Confucian philosophy da-tong (great unity), Rosenau’s “sovereignty-free” actors and Athenian democracy, and reflect on the cosmopolitan characteristics of cities that are absent in nation-states. With city diplomacy, TMNs transcend nationality for the common good of humanity; with “glocal” governance, citizens have the potential to participate in global policymaking through local institutions.

In Part II, I will draw on Dahl’s two “innumerable aspects of democracy” beyond territorial boundaries and De Búrca’s “democratic-striving approach,” and develop two “building blocks” of democracy at international level—equal participation and popular

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2 Thomas Hale, David Held and Kevin Young, Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation is Failing when We Need It Most (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
7 Rosenau, Turbulence in World Politics.
control. In a normative sense, city diplomacy and “glocal” governance are adherent to these two “building blocks.” While space constraint does not allow me to present the full empirical study of C40 here, this provides political justifications for TMNs in localising the global agenda and implementing SDGs at city level.

PART I

2. Setting the philosophical framework

Da-tong: a borderless world

In Confucian classics Li-yun (The Conveyance of Rites), a chapter of Li-ji (The Book of Rites), da-tong is regarded as the ideal political community:

“When the great way prevails, all the people of the world will work in the light of public spirit…Mankind will not only love their parents and care only for their children, but the public at large…In this way, selfishness will be repressed and find no room for expansion…This state is called da-tong.”

The concept of da-tong stems from the Spring and Autumn Warring States period (771-221 B.C.) in ancient China. Confucians viewed selfishness as the root of constant warfare between the seven states. Tong (unity) implies “un-differentiation,” in which people do not distinguish their families from the others. Everyone lives in peace and harmony, and cooperates for common wellbeing rather than competes for self-interest.

In Da-tong Shu (The Book of Great Unity), written in the late-19th century, late-Qing reformist Kang Yu-wei envisioned a world community without class and inequality. His ideas were radical: “abolishing national boundaries and unifying the world,” and “abolishing administrative boundaries and governing with complete peace-and-equality.” Kang’s interpretation of da-tong rejects nationalism and sovereignty, which place an emphasis on national interest over “what humans might have in common.” Da-tong, Kang believed, has the ultimate goal of a borderless world.

Kang was utopian, as Chairman Mao noted, “Kang wrote Da-tong Shu, but he did not and could not find the way to da-tong.” But if we borrow the wisdom of da-tong in 21st-century governance characterised by interdependence, we could build a world

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12 Yu Wei Kang, Da-tong Shu (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1927), ch.2, ch.8.
without borders, a world without differentiation of nationalities, and a world without brutal power struggle. People will cooperate with one another in peace and harmony, and transcend nationality for the common wellbeing of humanity. Human beings will attach not only to a particular community but also the humanity at large. It echoes with what Greek philosophers had spoken of cosmopolis, a “world-city” where everyone shares “a sense of bond with the larger cosmos and world-order of which we are a part...[and] an ethical concern for others based on our intrinsic kinship with all of humanity.”

Traditional diplomacy has failed the task. Nation-states have disappointed us. City diplomacy represents a promising and realistic model towards the state of da-tong, or cosmopolitan democracy.

**Cosmopolitan democracy: transcending nationality and sovereignty**

In the late-18th century, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, also an early interpreter of cosmopolitan principles, called for a “federation of free states,” or a “universal community.” Kant explicitly used the term “cosmopolitan right,” and spoke of “universal hospitality”—“the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory.” Modern German philosopher Jürgen Habermas challenged Kant’s statist assumption and called for a community of mankind with institutionalised “world citizenship,” as indicated in his book *Inclusion of the Other.*

Kant and Habermas nonetheless echo the cosmopolitan view that “human wellbeing is not defined by geographical or cultural locations,” which fits the notion of “un-differentiation” in da-tong.

Cosmopolitan democracy serves as a governance arrangement to realise such ideal. The central notion, as Held argued, is the extension of political institutions beyond national boundaries with the ultimate goal of internationalisation. He interpreted democracy as the right for all individuals to participate in this political process and decide their own fates on an equal basis. This requires a “common structure of political action,” i.e., world government. Drawing on the notion of “un-differentiation” in da-tong, a global governance arrangement meets the condition of cosmopolitan democracy if it is able to transcend nationality and sovereignty for the common wellbeing of humanity.

However, Held’s state-centric proposal does not satisfy this condition. If cosmopolitan democracy is to promote autonomy of everyone, individuals (population) should be reflected in the representation. This gives the seven most populated countries (China, India, the U.S., Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, and Nigeria), with over 50% of the

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17 Kant, “Perpetual peace,” 105.
19 Held, “Restructuring global governance,” 537.
world’s population, a stable majority that may lead to “tyranny of majority.” Alternatively, if each nation is entitled for one vote, 5% of the world’s population can override the interest of the remaining 95%, resulting in “tyranny of minority.” As nation-states remain the key actors, both options fail to transcend state boundaries and overcome national sovereignty—the fundamental barrier to cosmopolitan democracy. Even if it is a genuine “world election” that transcends national borders (e.g., a global, single constituency proportional representation system), it still fails to transcend nationality for the common interest of humanity: the Chinese will vote for the Chinese, the Japanese will vote for the Japanese, so on and so forth. Nationality will continue to divide humanity, defining “we” and “the others.” As Barber wrote, “Too often, internal bonding [of] states is built on exclusion and fear, a national identity, and pride in sovereign independence.” This explains why a world government seems unlikely to emerge. Perhaps, as in the popular Japanese anime series Gundam, the only instance of its emergence is a war between the Earth (“we”) and space-based enemies (“the others”).

From the “World Federalist Movement” (1947), to the recent “Campaign for a U.N. Parliamentary Assembly” (2007), scholars and practitioners like Joseph Schwartzberg (on “weighted voting”) have been exploring a “more democratic world government” for over half a century. The results do not justify the efforts. In a recent example, when the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi chaired the U.N. Security Council on February 23, 2015, he stated that “after 70 years, the U.N. Charter is [still] not out of date.” A U.N. reform is unthinkable. Indeed, why would nation-states submit themselves to a supreme authority with compulsory jurisdiction? As Kant wrote, “States are not likely to agree a complete surrender of their sovereignty.”

My answer to this fundamental barrier is that we stop talking about nation-states, and start talking about cities; that we stop talking about world government, and start talking about city diplomacy; that we stop talking about global democracy, and start talking about “glocal” governance. Before I move on to discuss how this governance model fulfils the condition of cosmopolitan democracy, I will draw on Rosenau’s “sovereignty-free” actors and Athenian democracy to inform the role of cities in global governance.

“Sovereignty-free” actors: breaking the “conceptual jail”

Students of international relations focus overwhelmingly on the inter-state system, as if the sovereignty of states renders them immunity to alternative authorities. Using the term “conceptual jail,” Rosenau contended that the state-centric model failed to understand the dynamics and transformation of world affairs. In other words, the state-

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24 Kant, “Perpetual peace,” 34.
centric model is no longer predominant; a multi-centric model of diverse and relatively autonomous non-state actors has emerged and coexisted with the older orderings.26

Rosenau argued that “sovereignty-bound,” state actors are constrained in way not applicable to “sovereignty-free,” non-state actors.27 With formal obligations inherent in sovereignty, state actors are confined by the responsibilities and limitations in what they can do. As we have seen in the pre-determined positions in climate negotiations, the defence of conflictual national interest often leads to gridlock in state-to-state cooperation. This was why Kang, in his interpretation of da-tong, rejected nationalism and sovereignty that emphasised selfish national interest. In this sense, sovereignty—or “selfishness,” in Confucian terminology—is the root cause of “gridlock.” In the extreme, as Lord Lothian wrote in the context of WWI, sovereignty has been “the root cause of the most crying evils…and of the steady march of humanity back to tragic disaster and barbarism.”28

In order to transcend sovereignty for the common good of humanity, the condition of cosmopolitan democracy, we need to break the “conceptual jail”—to move away from the state-centric model of global governance, and turn to non-state actors who enjoy the “freedom from sovereignty.” As Arquilla and Ronfeldt indicated, non-state actors can organise into transnational networks more readily than state actors.29 As I will show, the “non-sovereign,” pragmatic nature of city diplomacy serves to transcend sovereignty, advance transnational cooperation, and address the “gridlock.”

While territorial boundaries remain intact, the incompetence and remoteness of the inter-state system dilutes public trust and attachment towards national governments. Although the notion of “statehood” is still widely shared in many parts of the world, by no means it is contradictory with “cityhood.” Rosenau termed it “subgroupism,” in which citizens shift part of their loyalties from nation-states to “close-at-hand collectivities,” with the possibility to exercise meaningful participation and popular control.30 The deep affinities in between them also allow citizens to develop common identities and advance shared goals.31 “Subgroupism” informs the potential of “glocal” governance to connect citizens with global decision-making that affects them through municipal governments, which addresses the “democratic deficits.”

We have traditionally assumed nation-states as the legitimate subject in global governance for over 400 years. While they have had remarkable achievements, especially the formation of the U.N. and the European Union, they have also entered into “gridlock” and suffered from “democratic deficits.” It is time to recognise cities as one of the realistic alternatives that is still absent in the literature of international relations.

27 Rosenau, Turbulence in World Politics, 36.
30 Rosenau, Along the Domestic-foreign Frontier, 50; Distant Proximities, 74-75.
31 Rosenau, Turbulence in World Politics, 132-35.

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Political Science Association, Quebec City, August 1-5, 2000, 2, 4; Distant Proximities: Dynamics Beyond Globalization (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 410.
Athenian democracy: cities and citizens

The role of cities in global governance has regained some attention in urban sociology. Evinced in her global cities thesis, Sassen used cities as the lens to examine how globalisation restructures space and place. In essence, cities are the “strategic sites” where globalisation materialises, with global flows of money, information, and people through transnational networks of cities. Sassen argued that “city is a far more concrete space for politics than the nation.” While I acknowledge this debate on “public space”—things that are “visible” within cities, e.g., the formation of political subjects that do not go through formal political structure—this paper concerns with the potential of cities as an alternative global governance model. Thus, I am interested in the political justification of local political institutions to engage their citizens in global decision-making that affects their lives, which is absent in the discussion among urban sociologists.

Democracy was born and cultivated in around 500 B.C. in the Greek city-state Athens as “face-to-face participatory townships.” By democracy (demokratia), the Athenians meant active political rule by the citizens (demos), who had the right, at the very least, to participate in the Assembly (Ecclesia) that involves all citizens in at least 40 meetings each year, and serve in the Council (Boule) on a rotation basis. It was an attempt to connect every Athenian citizen to the city’s policymaking that affects their lives. This paper is not to advocate direct democracy, but to inform the role of cities as the unit of public participation.

As I revisit democracy through an Athenian lens, I find that policymaking can be grounded in “dispersed knowledge”—the wisdom of ordinary citizens who concern with, and believe themselves as the best judge in, policies that affect their own lives. This was possible in Athens, despite being “a socially diverse community,” because of the close relationship between citizens and the government that is “no longer possible in the nation-states of our times.” Consider the citizens of the most-established democracies on the world map: How many of them can actually participate in the policymaking of their national governments? How many of them can exert a meaningful influence in the resolutions of the U.N. Security Council through their national governments? While the Athenians were active actors in their own right, citizens of our times are merely passive subjects of nation-states.

As Held remarked, “There is only a historical contingent connection between the principles underpinning citizenship and the national community; as this connection weakens in a world of overlapping communities of fate, the principles of citizenship must

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37 Ober, “Public speech,” 484.
be rearticulated and re-entrenched.” Being developed in nation-states with defined boundaries and separated responsibilities for over a hundred years, democracy must now adapt to a transnational, interdependent, and fast-changing environment. Athenian democracy, a product of ancient Greece city-states (*polis*), can be re-imagined in today’s interconnected cities (*cosmopolis*). It informs how “glocal” governance serves as an answer to “democratic deficits.” As the original “public sphere,” cities allow ordinary citizens to turn into the political realm to the extent that is much more difficult in nation-states.

3. Conceptualising city diplomacy and “glocal” governance

*City diplomacy: horizontal link between cities*

While Held has provided a ground-breaking framework to study democratic governance across borders, he is trapped in the “conceptual jail.” Cosmopolitan democracy fails to take off because of his state-centric proposal. Building on Benjamin Barber, who advocated cities as the subject to “democratise globalisation” in *If Mayors Ruled the World*, I argue for the cosmopolitan characteristics of cities that are absent in nation-states.

International relations has long been placing cities as “a mere subset of the national,” rather than actors in global governance. Although the idea of “paradiplomacy” acknowledges the role of “subnational governments” in “trans-sovereign contacts,” scholars have little theoretical engagement with “the growing interaction between cities and global governance.” As Acuto wrote, “Cities are the invisible gorillas of international studies.”

City diplomacy, however, has a long tradition and is the root of modern diplomatic relations. Greek city-states exchanged envoys among themselves to negotiate on specific issues, particularly peace and trade, and recognised safety passage of each other’s citizens within their sphere of influence. In the early-16th century, German imperial cities had developed diplomatic practices. They dispatched official ambassadors and “[relied] upon merchants stationed abroad” to represent their interest and “send back detailed reports of their activities.” At present, C40, Local Governments on Sustainability (ICLEI), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), among others, serve as city-based international institutions to foster city-to-city cooperation in addressing common global challenges. The “Global Parliament of Mayors” will also inaugurate in October 2015.

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40 Held, “Restructuring global governance,” 542.
41 Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World*.
44 Acuto, *The Urban Link*, 1.
Pluijm and Melissen described city diplomacy as “the institutions and processes by which cities...engage in relations with actors on an international political state with the aim of representing themselves and their interests to one another.”  

Sizoo and Musch explored the role of city diplomacy in peace-building in terms of fostering social cohesion. Acuto contended that cities have the capacity to “[redefine] many scales of international politics” and “link transnational diplomatic action and public diplomacy initiatives.” In the London Olympics, cities interacted beyond national hierarchies and earned international significance despite their localised contexts. Building on these emerging analyses, I have two premises: (1) National government is no longer the only legitimate and effective political institution within national boundaries in the age of globalisation; and (2) cities can act together in peace and harmony for the common wellbeing of humanity, the central notion of da-tong, and fulfil the condition of cosmopolitan democracy.

Keohane and Nye first used the term “trans-governmental” to describe interactions among “sub-units of [national] governments” in respond to “greater [governance] complexity.” Risse-Kappen defined trans-governmental networks as “those among state officials in sub-units of national governments” who act “independently from declared [state] policies.” Raustiala described such networks as “peer-to-peer ties developed through frequent interaction.” Slaughter acknowledged their functions of information exchange and policy coordination through “a dense web of contacts.” Goldin remarked, “[These networks] are able to focus specifically on the common problem they face.”

Borrowing these literatures on “trans-governmental,” I conceptualise city diplomacy as “trans-municipal”—horizontal networks between “sovereignty-free” cities that work through peer-to-peer ties among municipal officials on specific common challenges. Without sovereign obligations, cities are able to put aside ideological constraints, concentrate on concrete and ambitious objectives, and get the jobs done. London Mayor Boris Johnson described his bike-sharing scheme “an entirely Communist scheme put in by a Conservative mayor.” The fundamental barrier towards cosmopolitan democracy is sovereignty and nationality that define and divide “we” and “others.” Because of the

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49 Acuto, “World politics by other means?,” 310.
“sovereignty-free,” “non-partisan” and “pragmatic” nature of municipal governance, city diplomacy transcends this fundamental barrier for networked solutions.

Cities can act and work with one another whether states are trapped in the gridlock or not. While the 114 heads-of-state failed the task at COP15 in Copenhagen, over 200 mayors attended a parallel climate summit, agreed on collaborative efforts, and are still working together through TMNs like the C40, ICLEI, and UCLG. States have already conducted 20 COP since 1995—that means, national leaders have repeatedly declared that “we will act together” for at least 20 years. They may wish to reach an agreement, but worry that its binding nature would infringe their sovereignty. One notable example is the U.S.’s refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Real progress does not emerge from this seemingly endless global negotiation that lacks tangible outcomes, but from the concrete actions of local implementation. Borrowing the wisdom of former New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, “There is no Democratic or Republican way of fixing a sewer.” This get-the-job-done spirit holds cities together and anchored their interdependence. As Goldin wrote, “Cities...are taking over from national governments in terms of their leadership regarding critical 21st-century governance challenges.”

City diplomacy presents us an emerging model with the characteristics of the state of da-tong: a world of peace and harmony rather than confrontation and rivalry, of common wellbeing rather than national self-interest, of shared kinship rather than separated communities. It represents a realistic account towards a cosmopolitan order of pragmatic interdependence rather than national independence, of horizontal networks rather than hierarchical order, of democratic glocalisation rather than top-down imposition.

“Glocal” governance: vertical link between local citizens and global policies

I am not arguing to replace nation-states with cities. What I argue for is the unique position of cities to connect their citizens with global policies. As the father of modern democratic theories Robert Dahl argued, nation-states and state-based international organisations, have failed to do so. “Glocal” governance, with municipal governments as the main actor, serves as the vertical link and fills this gap. Democratic global governance is no longer beyond reality, even in the absence of a democratically elected world government.

Robertson originally used the term “glocalisation” in the analysis of local response to global pressures. Robertson and White wrote, “Rather than speaking of an inevitable tension between the local and the global, it might be possible to think of the two as not being opposites but rather as being different sides of the same coin.” Drawing on this notion, “glocalisation” involves connecting the locals with the global system. Therefore, I conceptualise “glocal” governance as the political arrangement, or vertical link, which

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56 ICLEI, The Local Government Climate Lounge (Bonn: ICLEI World Secretariat, 2010), 1.
57 Goldin, Divided Nations, 166.
58 Dahl, “Can international organizations be democratic?”
allows citizens to participate in *global* decision-making through *local* (municipal) governments. As Glocal Forum argued, “Cities represent a key point of encounter between the local and the global.”

The line between local and global affairs has become blurred. As Rosenau wrote, “What is domestic is also foreign and what is foreign is also domestic.” Climate change is traditionally thought of as a global issue; however, it has become an urgent local challenge. Cities are responsible for over 70 percent of greenhouse gas emission and 80 percent of energy consumption. As 90 percent of the cities situated along the coastline, they face the common climate threats like rising sea levels and costal storms. This urgency justifies the necessity of the “glocal” arrangement that connects local governance to the global system, and allows local citizens to enter into global policies.

Drawing on “subgroupism,” democratic global governance should move away from “sovereignty-bound” national structure and move towards “sovereignty-free,” “close-at-hand” local authorities. Cities are important because of the day-to-day interactions and close relationship between municipal governments and citizens. As Athenian democracy and Habermas’s “public sphere” tell us, cities are the place where citizens can engage in an ongoing political process, own and influence the policy that affects their lives, and hold the authorities directly accountable to them. Within the framework of “glocal” governance, municipal governments serve as the vertical link that enables citizens to participate in *global* policymaking through *local* institutions, bypassing national authorities. With city diplomacy and “glocal” governance, international decision-making can be democratic.

**PART II**

4. The “building blocks” of democracy beyond boundaries

*Democratic global governance: a pragmatic approach*

Dahl presented two criteria of democracy beyond territorial boundaries: equal participation and popular control. Equal participation refers to the free and equal right for everyone to determine the conditions of their own lives, and receive equal consideration of their interests. In essence, it informs an inclusive approach of global governance, in which all actors are placed on the same formal condition to participate, with equal weight in making and contesting decisions that affect their lives.

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65 Dahl, “Can international organizations be democratic?,” 20.
Dahl also argued for “a system of popular control,” in which the government is “responsive and accountable to the demos.” 67 Citizens have the ability to impose sanctions on political institutions—to attach costs to the failure to meet the expectations—and limit their authority. 68 In essence, it informs the opportunity for citizens to make use of their rights to influence policies and “govern themselves democratically.” 69

However, these two criteria are never completely fulfilled even at the domestic level. 70 In order to avoid consigning the pursuit of democratic global governance to the utopian bin, I draw on DeBúrca’s (2008) “democratic-striving approach” to develop the “building blocks” in a pragmatic, achievable manner. According to DeBúrca (2008, 117), as long as a political institution exercises an “ongoing and continuously revised endeavour to facilitate the comprehensive participation and representation of those affected,” it acquires the source of democracy at global level. As she argued, this approach acknowledges the complexity of democratic global governance yet insists on its necessity.

Dahl’s scepticism: underestimating “sovereignty-free,” sub-national actors

Dahl was sceptic towards democratic global governance, as he insisted that “international decision-making,” which is beyond the democratic threshold of territorial boundaries, “will not be democratic.” He referenced it to the “fundamental democratic dilemma:” The incompatible choice between (1) a national political unit, which retains citizens’ right to participate and control its conduct, but fails to tackle transnational challenges effectively; and (2) a supranational political unit to “deal more effectively with these matters,” but compromise citizens’ democratic right. 71

This argument provides no meaningful policy implications: Shall we simply sit here and criticise the “democratic deficits” of the international system? We must reshape the way global governance organises to meet the problems without passport in a world without borders.

Although Dahl acknowledged that political institutions at the global level “will be of enormous variety,” he grounded his scepticism entirely on the state-centric model and underestimated the potential of “sovereignty-free,” sub-national actors to democratise globalisation. 72 This is no longer valid today. Endeavours towards democratic global governance should go beyond nation-states, and recognise the diversity of alternative

political arrangements. City diplomacy and “glocal” governance “rescue” Dahl, and serve as one of the alternatives to fight the world’s fight in the absence of a supranational authority.

Equal participation and city diplomacy

The post-WWII international order has sustained because of the institutionalised inequality among nation-states. The permanent membership of the U.N. Security Council gives the five great powers (at that time) veto power on resolutions that run against their sovereignty and national interest, and thus incentivises them to act and resolve their conflicts through the established institution. Without the P5, the U.N. might face the destiny of the League of Nations with members’ withdrawal. While it has succeeded (so far) to prevent a WWII, it is clearly an unequal representation and participation anchored in power. The governance of the two Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and the World Bank, also reflects such inequality. The soon-inaugurate AIIB may simply shift the domination from the West to China, whose $30 billion contribution to the capital base will earn the veto power on “important decisions.” As former Director-General of WTO Pascal Lamy commented, this inequality reflects the absence of “shared values”—ideological differences—among state powers.

This is where city diplomacy steps in. As “sovereignty-free” actors, the “non-partisan” and “pragmatic” nature of cities brings them together in horizontal networks. City-to-city cooperation goes beyond power per se, because there is no potential sovereignty infringement, no conflictual national interest, and no obsession with boundaries or predetermined positions. In other words, city diplomacy places the emphasis on the common wellbeing of cities, over exclusive sovereignty rights. Drawing on da-tong, it promotes peaceful and harmonious relationships, and facilitates equal and inclusive participation, among cities. Cities can put aside ideological differences and work together for mutual benefits.

However, equal participation may face challenges “owning to disparities in the resources of the actors.” A small number of resourceful actors may, intentionally or unintentionally, act through a dominant governance structure and set the agenda, without equal consideration of the interests of the others in the TMN. This risks compromising the basis for equal participation.

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The horizontal and non-hierarchical nature of TMNs nonetheless places all members on the same formal condition to participate. The focus on knowledge-sharing and capacity building reflects the ongoing efforts to solidify the inclusive approach and promote equal participation among members in the decision-making.78 Because of the non-sovereign nature of cities, TMNs provide cities the opportunity to exercise their right to participate in global decision-making on an equal basis, which transcends traditional power politics among states. Normatively, city diplomacy is coherent to equal participation.

*Popular control and “glocal” governance*

Dahl contended that democracy would diminish with size because citizens have insignificant opportunities to effectively control remote international institutions.79 This, however, is an existing problem that also applies within nation-states. Citizens, even in democracies, also find it difficult to channel public opinions onto the agenda of national governments, not to mention effective control. As Jean Monnet, the architect and founding father of the European Union, said, “The sovereign state is too big for participation.”80 If we accept Dahl’s argument on size and remoteness, and if the first step—networked cooperation among cities in global public policy—is established, we should shift our attention to cities as the unit of democratic global governance as the second step.

Cities are closer to citizens. As Athenian democracy tells us, this allows citizens to serve as active participants in the ongoing political process, rather than merely electorates in every few years, and grounds policymaking in their “dispersed knowledge.” In essence, citizens can influence policymaking and punish wrongdoings. Compared with national governments, the accountability and public scrutiny municipal governments face are more direct. In the U.S., despite polls repeatedly showed that over 90 percent Americans favoured universal background check for gun buyers, the Congress still rejected the legislation owning to the strong influence of the National Rifle Association.81 In contrast, over 1,000 mayors formed the bipartisan coalition “Mayors Against Illegal Guns” to “oppose all federal efforts to restrict cities’ right [in gun control].”82 If municipal officials fail to respond to citizens’ demands, they will be out of their jobs.

Public trust is also higher at municipal than national level. In 2014, while the U.S. federal government and the Congress earned 19 percent and 7 percent of Americans’ trust respectively, the municipal governments scored 72 percent, on average, from their

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79 Dahl, “Can international organizations be democratic?,” 20.
citizens. This explains “subgroupism:” Citizens tend to entrust “close-at-hand” structures that give them the experience of direct participation and influence. With the prospect of global cooperation through TMNs, cities are in a better position to connect citizens to global policymaking that affects them.

However, if states prioritise sovereignty on top of everything that fails to connect their citizens to global policymaking, why would they permit cities to surpass them and operationalise “glocal” governance through TMNs? As Barber remarked, “Sovereignty…remains a trump card in regulating the collaborative ['glocal'] strategies that cities are trying to pursue.”

In fact, most cities possess the level of mayoral power to “go global,” even in unitary regimes. Despite the highly-centralised political system, the Chinese government has made “clear commitment to local autonomy,” especially on urban, economic and environmental issues. One of the founding aims of the state-organised China Association of Mayors is to foster Chinese cities’ global engagement in these areas. As of February, 2015, 444 of them have established 2,154 partnerships with foreign cities. In France, another unitary regime, 4,806 municipalities have engaged in cooperation with their counterparts in 147 countries over the last few decades.

Cities are taking concrete actions in areas with or without formal mayoral power. In areas where C40 Cities possess limited power, they have nonetheless taken 1,027 climate actions. National governments increasingly recognise this. In his first post-election address, British Chancellor George Osborne admitted that people feel “remote from the decisions that affect their lives,” which is “not good” for prosperity or democracy, and declared that the “old model” to run everything from the Westminster is “broken.” In the Queen’s Speech, the Cameron Administration formally recognised the distance between citizens and the central government, and promised a “Cities Devolution Bill” that will introduce “elected metro mayors” and empower cities with local autonomy.

84 Barber, If Mayors Ruled the World, 149.
88 Barber, If Mayors Ruled the World, 137.
89 C40 and Arup, C40 Cities: The Power to Act (London: C40 and Arup, 2014), 2; Powering Climate Action: Cities as Global Changemakers (London: C40 and Arup, 2015), 50.
90 George Osborne, Chancellor on Building a Northern Powerhouse [Speech], delivered at Victoria Warehouse, Manchester, May 14, 2015.
91 Cabinet Office, Queen’s Speech 2015 [Speech], delivered at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, May 27, 2015.
Even if national governments seek to hold municipal governments back, cities are still able to draw on public support and demonstrate their leadership. In the fight against the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Seoul Mayor Park Won-Soon criticised the Korean government for conceiving information of the epidemic, and thus used his “own ways” and “all-out efforts” to protect Seoul citizens. He launched the “Anti-MERS Headquarters,” established a real-time information system, chased people who have come into contact with patients, and ordered the Seoul Police to enforce quarantines. After days of “time lag,” Korean President Park Geun-hye finally announced her “all-out efforts,” including information sharing and quarantine monitoring at hospitals. Despite the Korean government’s probe over the Mayor on “spreading false information,” he has been ranked “the most-favoured presidential hopeful,” in contrast to the President’s new low in approval rating. Cities are where the action is, whether national governments like it or not.

Cities are sufficiently local to realise popular control, yet sufficiently global to bring about networked cooperation through TMNs. “Glocal” governance provides cities the opportunity to transcend the “democratic threshold” of national boundaries to connect local citizens to global public policy. Normatively, “glocal” governance is coherent to popular control.

Why C40? The political justifications

C40 is an inter-governmental network of 75 mega-cities committed to utilising cooperative efforts in taking concrete local actions that can add up to create global effect on climate change. C40 launched a City Diplomacy Strategy in 2014 to demonstrate cities' leadership and catalyse climate actions. As of 2014, C40 Networks have implemented 8,068 actions at city level that directly affect the lives of citizens. This shows that city diplomacy is a potential way to transcend traditional power struggle among nation-states and implement SDGs at the local level.

C40 has also gained both formal international recognition and significant local achievement. On the one hand, Michael Bloomberg, C40 Board President and former Chair, was appointed by the U.N. Secretary-General as Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change to “raise political will and mobilize action among cities...brining

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94 C40, C40 City Diplomacy [Online]. http://www.c40.org/city_diplomacy

95 C40 and Arup, Climate Action in Megacities Version 2.0 (London: C40 and Arup, 2014), 12.
concrete solutions to the Climate Summit. Specifically, C40 is the leading driver of the U.N. Compact of Mayors, a global coalition of cities to tackle climate change, and the Climate Summit for Local Leaders at COP21. This shows that “glocal” governance is promising in connecting cities and citizens to global public policy and localising the global agenda.

5. Conclusion

My bottom line is: The road to cosmopolitan democracy does not run through states; it runs through cities. With city diplomacy and “glocal” governance, international decision-making can be democratic. On the one hand, city diplomacy presents us an emerging model with the characteristics of the state of da-tong: A world of peace and harmony rather than confrontation and rivalry, of common wellbeing rather than national self-Interest, of shared kinship rather than separated communities. It represents a realistic account towards a cosmopolitan order of pragmatic interdependence rather than national independence, of horizontal networks rather than hierarchical order, of democratic glocalisation rather than top-down imposition. On the other hand, “glocal” political arrangement connects citizens and international decision-making processes through municipal governments. It extends political process “beyond the democratic threshold” of territorial boundaries. It “increase[s] the accountability, transparency and legitimacy of global governance,” while overcoming the problematic proposal of a “[binding] common structure of political action.”

True, cities are different. But cities share the common, pressing challenges in climate change, immigration, urban sustainability, housing, urban poverty, public health, security, jobs, and many more. These are the problems that unite cities together, without conflicting interest as in the nation-states.

I am not arguing for a new international organisation, but an appreciation of the cosmopolitan characteristics and democratic credentials of networked cities. While city-to-city networks can make a significant difference in addressing global challenges, it is not a substitute for state-to-state agreements. Nation-states still matter, and cities are not going to replace them. What cities can replace is the “conceptual jail” of state-centric international relations, which falls short of the 21st-century governance challenges, and the outworn ideology of “inalienable national sovereignty,” which brought us to the two deadliest world wars in human history. Cities are our best hope to transcend the evilness of nationality, embrace the common wellbeing of humanity, and move towards a cosmopolitan order.


Seoul Metropolitan Government (2015a) “All-out Efforts” to Curb MERS [Online].


http://unfccc.int/meetings/copenhagen_dec_2009/meeting/6295.php


