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Global Political Cities as Actors in Twenty-First Century International Affairs

Kent E. Calder, Mariko de Freytas

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Abstract

Amidst this emphasis on the role of the state in both domestic and international affairs, the study of cities and their broader political-economic functions has been seriously neglected—a bias that we intend in this paper to redress. We develop here the concept of the “global political city”—a broad community, with complex non-governmental socio-economic dimensions, that nevertheless serves as an important arena for political transactions. After elaborating the general concept, we apply it concretely in the case of Washington, D.C., and suggest potential applications elsewhere in the world, noting the particular significance of the “strategic information complex” typically evolving in such cities as a source of international influence.

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A vigorous interdisciplinary field of Urban Studies first emerged in the 1960s, bringing urban planners, architects, sociologists, criminologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and even a few political scientists together to consider how cities operate, evolve, and relate to the higher domestic layers of government in which they are embedded.¹ Yet for many years, little work was done on the role of cities in the international system. Such analysis of the global role of cities has been inhibited both by the insignificance of the actual role that cities played and the dominance of the realist state-centric paradigm in international relations.

Over the last two millennia, however, a few cities have periodically emerged as international political centers. By and large, these were imperial capital cities like Thebes, Babylon, Persepolis, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople, to name but a few. There were also city-states that combined both national and municipal characteristics, as was the case with Athens and Sparta in the classic age, or Venice, Genoa, and the members of the Hanseatic League during the European Middle Ages.

The functions of these communities, their interest-group configurations, the ways in which services were provided, and even their physical layout, fundamentally affected how the nations in which they were embedded

Kent Calder is the director of the SAIS Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies, and the author of five books on East Asian political economy and security, including most recently *Pacific Alliance: Reviving U.S.-Japan Relations* (Yale University Press, 2009); and *Embattled Garrison: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Mariko de Freytas is a Research Associate at the Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies.



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