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CITY POWER IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Equipping Local Leaders in Geopolitics

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Introduction

"Which foreign country would you visit first as Mayor?" The moderator of the first debate in the 2025 race for New York City mayor [posed](#) this question to nine candidates. That the question was asked is perhaps more telling than the responses and shows an emerging theme across U.S. cities: American mayors and local government officials are quickly emerging as some of the most consequential actors in international affairs.

Geopolitical trends appear in cities first, often simultaneously and unexpectedly. Local officials now require a global perspective to develop effective, immediate responses to local needs. As established boundaries between domestic responsibilities and international statecraft blur, capability gaps in American city halls become urgent.

American city officials are increasingly confronted with insufficient geopolitical knowledge and inadequate practical skills, as the expectations and responsibilities of their roles evolve. Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt, the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, acknowledges this trend publicly, [saying](#) "American cities are increasingly global cities, and so it is vital that mayors stay engaged in global affairs."



American cities are increasingly global cities, and so it is vital that mayors stay engaged in global affairs."

Mayor David Holt

Oklahoma City, OK

City leaders now take direct action on geopolitical issues traditionally managed at the national level. This upends the traditional expectation that local officials narrowly focus on municipal governance and engage in global affairs only to promote economic opportunities, education, and cultural exchange.

When floods and fires come home, mayors are on the frontlines of climate change. Once a global pandemic hits American cities, local officials urgently navigate new science, emerging safety protocols, global economic disruption, and complex international supply chains. When viewed together, housing shortages, surging strains on services and infrastructure, and community tensions over resources show mayors must manage rapid global population growth in cities. When a cyberattack hits a city's digital infrastructure or artificial intelligence tools optimize transportation and sanitation services, mayors are at the forefront of global technological change. While a seemingly-benign foreign business delegation visits city hall, local leaders may face a real-time national security threat from sophisticated foreign adversaries. Local officials navigate an increasingly complex, interconnected world and their roles must evolve to meet the moment.

The twenty-first century will be marked by complex, interconnected global challenges and city leaders act first when these issues appear locally. Americans are looking for leadership outside of Washington D.C. to address global issues, to engage when the federal government withdraws from global affairs, and to find solutions when global challenges hit cities.



Successful city engagement at scale requires increased resources for geopolitical training, deepening local constituent appreciation for critical international work, respect and curiosity from officials in Washington, and cooperation across all levels of government.

Those who serve the public in our city halls lack preparation and resources to deliver on these expanded responsibilities. This is an increasingly urgent need for American cities.

Institutional Landscape and Critical Resource Gaps

In January 2023, for the first time ever, a U.S. Secretary of State addressed the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Secretary Antony Blinken emphasized mayors' "leadership is vital, and it's going to be even more so in the years ahead." This moment marked a significant shift in federal appreciation for the role local leaders play in international affairs—but coordination by the U.S. government remains insufficiently resourced, poorly designed to meet cities' needs, and vulnerable to changes by the executive branch.



[Mayors'] leadership is vital, and it's going to be even more so in the years ahead."

Secretary Antony Blinken

*former U.S. Secretary of State,
addressing U.S. Conference of Mayors*

The White House and U.S. federal agencies connect federal domestic policy and services to state and local officials through intergovernmental affairs offices. These channels are largely separate from any international affairs offices housed in domestic-focused agencies. Intergovernmental channels are often disconnected from each other and omit coordination on international affairs. In the U.S. Department of State, the lead international affairs agency within the federal government, intergovernmental affairs were long housed within public affairs structures inherently focused on communications with domestic constituencies, rather than policy coordination. The U.S. federal government has traditionally viewed mayors and city leaders primarily as stakeholders in domestic affairs.

That was until 2022, when the State Department created the Subnational Diplomacy Unit. This functioned as a mechanism for federal-to-local communication and coordination on foreign policy that had domestic implications. From coordination on disrupting fentanyl supply chains to cybersecurity for digital infrastructure, the Subnational Diplomacy Unit served as a direct channel for city leaders to engage in international affairs. Local leaders looked to this office to promote economic investment and trade, educational exchange, climate and sustainability, crisis preparedness, and diplomacy briefings and protocol awareness in advance of a city's international engagement.

The Trump administration eliminated the State Department Subnational Diplomacy Unit in 2025, leaving cities more isolated in their international work. American city officials have begun to fall behind their foreign peers. [France](#), [Australia](#), and Canada highly value two-way coordination between their national and local governments and there exist institutionalized mechanisms for local officials



to influence national policy relevant to cities, to meet with foreign peers on areas of mutual interest, and to engage effectively and independently in international affairs. In many other countries, city diplomacy is integrated into national policy development and program delivery and usually funded by national governments.

The U.S. government, instead, largely funds institutional partners that implement programs to advance American foreign policy goals. Absent routine, integrated mechanisms for American cities to contribute to that vision, however, the federal government relegates city officials to mere stakeholders in the execution of policy, rather than valued partners in shaping policy, especially related to international affairs. Without mechanisms for American cities to help shape that vision, the federal government has diminished the potential of city leadership.

70% of the global population will live in a city by 2050—

up from about 57% today and 47% back in 2000.

Source: U.N. Development Program (UNDP)

American cities need to engage with their foreign counterparts or risk being left behind at a pivotal time. According to United Nations [projections](#), nearly 70% of people on the planet will live in a city by 2050—that means 2.5 billion more city residents over the next 25 years.

Given this projected global population growth and urbanization, the scale of international city networks has expanded significantly in recent decades. Roughly 250-300 associations of local

municipalities operate globally, nearly half of which are transnational organizations. Medium and smaller U.S. cities often do not participate, missing opportunities to connect with international counterparts, access platforms and tools to exchange ideas, and benefit from these networks. For example, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) represents over 240,000 members in over 140 U.N. member states, effectively representing more than half the world's current population— but U.S. cities do not participate directly in that network, possibly leaving local leaders at a disadvantage relevant to global peers.



Mayor Muriel Bowser,
Washington, D.C.

Head of International
Affairs Committee, U.S.
Conference of Mayors

Instead, the U.S. relies heavily on the non-profit sector to coordinate, convene, and advocate on behalf of city interests. Major institutions serving American cities, such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities, respond to increased demand for geopolitical knowledge and coordination. These investments show international engagement by city leaders requires routine coordination, access to technical assistance, and resources to professionalize the work inside city halls.

Some U.S. cities have set up designated departments, offices, agencies, or interagency working groups to coordinate international affairs at the local level, but these mostly exist in large cities. Many medium and small cities are under-resourced and over-stretched already. While 84% of global cities [surveyed in 2024](#) maintained international affairs offices, only half of city officials reported that staff conducting international activities had relevant qualifications for that role—and even by that standard, American city halls lag behind.

Limited municipal budgets mean training and professional development remain inadequate. In only [10% of cases](#) where international officers received training was a formal process or certification offered. The 2024 city diplomacy survey [highlights](#) this missed opportunity: 80% of cities indicate they would increase their international engagements if they had access to dedicated funds.



Local governments are adding international capacity despite limited support. In 2024, [seven of nine major California cities](#) had an office or staff dedicated to international affairs, up from only three cities in 2010. This growth—driven by global challenges affecting local communities—reflects increased recognition of the need to build capabilities for international engagement.

Existing gaps in critical skills and resources create vulnerabilities in both economic competitiveness and national security. Without this support, American mayors risk being outmaneuvered by both allies and adversaries who have developed more sophisticated approaches into their global engagement strategies—a phenomenon increasingly noticed by the U.S. federal security agencies.

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center issued [guidance](#) in July 2022 to local leaders warning that some countries engage local leaders, understanding that they "enjoy a degree of independence from Washington," and potentially seeking to exploit that independence in their pursuit of direct relationships with cities. Training for city leaders on the exchange of information relevant to international security issues has become imperative for city officials who frequently communicate with foreign corporations and governments.

Some healthy tensions emerge from American city officials who must engage with and act on geopolitical trends. A Chicago Council survey from 2022 [points to](#) the contradiction that "overall, cities wanted to retain independence over their international engagements, with only 20% believing national governments should have a say" in their global work. Efforts to provide federal resources and expertise, if not done carefully, could threaten the flexibility and responsiveness that make local engagement abroad effective.

Cities regularly nurture relationships with each other and with foreign governments independent of federal coordination. Without a central hub to coordinate these activities, these local-to-local relationships do not yet meaningfully contribute to national policy. The sum total of cities working together in international affairs could serve as an aggregate expression of local needs, service delivery, and global agenda-setting.

Strategic Impact of Local International Engagement



Americans increasingly call upon local leaders to address global challenges they do not control and might not understand, and most Americans trust them to respond with solutions. The annual [Gallup survey](#) on public trust, shows nearly **70% of Americans** have more faith in local government than other levels of government to solve problems.

As global challenges appear locally, the role of city officials in international affairs will grow more influential in shaping the contours of American foreign policy. Mayors in medium and small U.S. cities largely serve in nonpartisan roles, and may be called upon as trusted officials to do more across global issues. This is especially true as partisanship in Washington erodes public trust, risks drastic policy swings with each election cycle, and renders federal policy on complex geopolitical issues less consistent and reliable.



Economic Development and Cultural Exchange

U.S. mayors routinely engage in economic diplomacy as a part of their official responsibilities. This includes visits abroad to promote trade, travel, and tourism, and partnerships that press the advantage of local economies, whether rooted in agriculture, technology, manufacturing, or other region-specific assets.



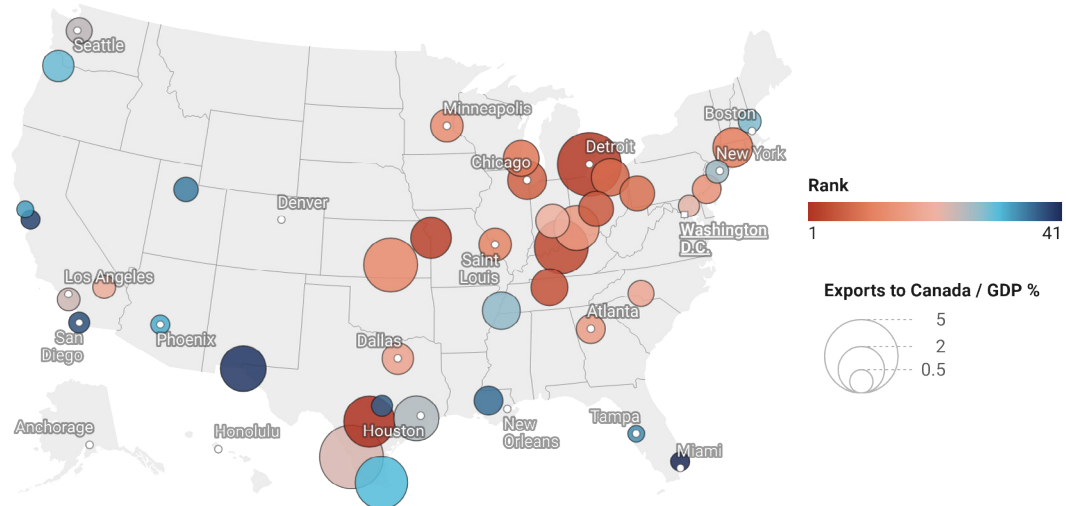
Mayor Andrew Ginther,
Columbus, OH

Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther, who represents the 14th largest U.S. city and finished his term as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors earlier this year, [embraced](#) the global potential of his role proudly and publicly: “My job as mayor is to raise our city’s profile and get more direct investment from places around the country and the world and doing everything in my power to promote our city as a great place to live, to do business, and invest.” Local constituencies see positive results from the mayor’s international engagement. They credit him for the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue which came from his in-person advocacy with counterparts abroad.

Trade disruptions in 2025 accelerate local diplomatic efforts as mayors work to protect regional economic interests. In response to the urgent need for cross-border dialogue, the U.S. Conference of Mayors [hosted](#) Canadian and Mexican mayoral counterparts in a trade delegation to Washington, D.C. in March 2025 to address new changes to tariffs and trade policies. This illustrates how city officials will engage on trade policy out of local economic imperatives and respect for longstanding partnerships, whether or not dialogue happens at the federal level.

Cities like San Antonio, Detroit, Kansas City, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, and Seattle send the [majority of their exports](#) to Canada. These cities share vulnerabilities and opportunities to deepen direct working relationships with Canadian counterparts. Without efforts to maintain open trade, cities have taken to engaging peers abroad and trying to find creative work-arounds that protect their economic interests. This engagement also shows continuity by American officials in a time of significant policy change. City officials act as unofficial ambassadors for their constituents, signaling support for things such as open trade, travel and tourism, and other types of international exchange, even when unsupported by their federal government.

U.S. Cities Most Export-Dependent on Canada



Note: Cities with a higher dependence on Canada to the U.S. average are in red.

Source: Datawrapper, Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Business Data Lab



This pattern of local engagement in international economic statecraft emerged after more than a century and accelerated after World War II. At the time, American cities positioned themselves to leverage comparative advantages within expanding global markets and set up people-to-people cultural and educational exchanges to deepen ties. City-to-city matching programs have grown over decades, estimated at over 11,000 partnerships worldwide, with Sister Cities International representing over 1,800 partnerships today that connect U.S. cities to foreign counterparts.

As the world continues to become more interconnected, these long-standing city-to-city relationships serve now as a stabilizing force in U.S. economic and cultural relations, and will remain valuable channels for communication and collaboration in the future.

COVID-19 Pandemic Response

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic is an instructive example of local international engagement under extreme crisis conditions, one which showcased the sophistication, resourcefulness, and dedication of so many local officials.

A March 2020 U.S. Conference of Mayors [survey](#) of 213 cities from 41 states found that **91.5% of cities** lacked adequate face mask supplies for first responders and medical personnel, while **88.2%** did not have sufficient personal protective equipment. Cities represented over 42 million Americans facing immediate threat from global pandemic" - though the number, by definition, was much higher.

The Strategic National Stockpile, the federal repository of medical supplies to be deployed in a public health emergency, contained only 30 million N95 respirators in March of 2020 when pandemic scenarios estimated needing 3.5 billion for only 30% of Americans. This massive shortfall forced city leaders to instantly become international procurement specialists, establishing direct relationships with foreign manufacturers and navigating complex supply chains. The minimal federal coordination and assistance left local officials bidding against each other and the federal government for life-saving equipment. This was only the first pandemic challenge mayors had to confront, and it made them operate instantly on the world stage.

[A critical effort](#) led by former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg brought together political leaders, expert practitioners, [public health officials](#), and [academics](#) to quickly establish critical international knowledge-sharing platforms that helped local officials across the globe respond effectively. Recovery [task-forces](#) facilitated cooperation among states and cities when national and multilateral systems struggled to deliver effective responses. The federal government eventually [worked](#) hand-in-hand with governors and mayors, but in the initial crisis period, local leaders had to learn in real-time about complex international supply chains, global vaccine production timelines, and how to independently coordinate with world health organizations.

The relationships that local officials built around the shared experiences of governing through the pandemic crisis have endured and remain operational. "COVID-19 opened up new channels for engagement," reported 55% of respondents in the [2024 biennial survey on cities and international engagement](#), and one-third from the 49 participating cities said they established new international partnerships from the pandemic, according to findings from the University of Melbourne Center for Cities and Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs.



Climate Change Mitigation and Resilience

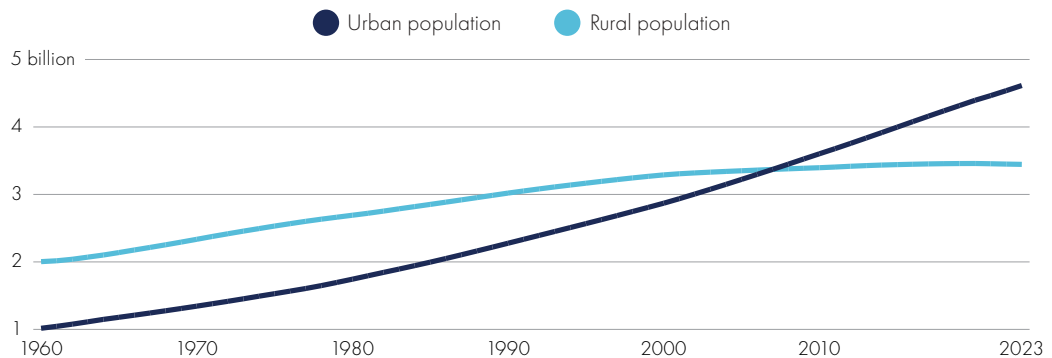


Mayor Michelle Wu,
Boston, MA
Executive Committee,
Climate Mayors

International climate diplomacy is the leading example of a mature, successful collective action model for local international engagement at scale. This dedication to climate leadership shows in the [2024 city diplomacy survey](#), where climate change was by far the priority issue for city international engagement: 82% of cities surveyed named it as their top issue. Cities are working together as mayors internationally seek to maintain commitments agreed to in the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement.

Local officials work together to adopt local policy changes that reflect responsibility for the [70% of global carbon emissions coming from cities](#) and that address the risks of climate change to major global population centers. Coordination networks are well established and resourced for action, like the [Global Covenant of Mayors](#), the largest global organization for city climate action, [Climate Mayors](#) in the United States and [ICLEI](#) for many international cities, and [C40 Cities](#), a climate leadership group of nearly 100 major global cities, that largely drives concurrent, high-leverage work of megacities, and includes 14 major American cities, one-twelfth of the world's population, and 25% of the global economy.

Number of people living in urban and rural areas, World



Note: Because the estimates of city and metropolitan areas are based on national definitions of what constitutes a city or metropolitan area, cross-country comparisons should be made with caution.

Source: World Bank based on data from the UN Population Division (2025), OurWorldinData

Migration Governance

Migration has emerged as a critical area of local international engagement, driven as much by the necessity of responding to increased cross-border population flows as by workforce needs or humanitarian considerations. Because they often receive limited federal support for migration-related services, American mayors often coordinate with their foreign peers on international migration, and seek direct relationships with international organizations. Serving as exit and entry points for migrants, cities frequently are first to meet their basic needs.

Rapid population growth already causes massive housing shortages and raises questions about national identity, social cohesion, and access to resources. Migration patterns continue to strain water, food, and energy supplies, and require foresight and planning for infrastructure development. Cities that cite migration as a priority rose significantly from 6% in 2020 to 14% in 2022 and more than doubled to 33% in 2024, according to the [2024 city diplomacy survey](#).



Mayor Mike Johnston,
Denver, CO

Leadership Board,
Mayors Migration
Council

In 2024, the [Mayors Migration Council](#) worked with local leaders from over 80 cities, expanding their global network to 275 cities, and securing a seat at the Global Forum on Migration and Development. Denver Mayor Mike Johnston joined the organization's Leadership Board in 2025, bringing American city perspectives to global migration governance discussions.

Sustained engagement from mayors has shaped key international agreements from the [U.N. Pact for the Future](#) to the [G20 Leaders' Declaration](#). These agreements demonstrate how coordinated geopolitical engagement between cities can influence policy frameworks traditionally developed and implemented by national governments. The Mayors Migration Council, a mayor-led coalition of more than 275 city leaders internationally, reports their organization's support has increased the ability of 96% of their partnering cities to engage in multilateral initiatives on migration and displacement.

Empowering Local Leaders Globally: Strategic Recommendations

City officials risk being overwhelmed by the complexity of global issues shaping their communities. Many local leaders already face real-time tests, may be unaware of how their experiences fit into geopolitical trends, and lack the mechanisms for accessing reliable, nonpartisan expertise and support from useful peer networks.

Local governments need staff who understand cultural contexts, can navigate international politics and protocols, and will recognize potential security risks. Cities must support the work of local officials who already engage in geopolitics, or cities risk being outpaced by global peers.

The ability to communicate effectively about the impact of international affairs on local constituents leads to increased public trust, stronger civic participation, and resilient public institutions at a critical moment for all three. Elected leaders who are politically and geographically closer to their constituents can more closely represent those citizens' geopolitical interests.

Better informed and trained local officials will lead to more public appreciation and support for how cities are ever more consequential geopolitical actors, while deepening connectivity to constituents' interests and better serving their needs.

As U.S. cities lag behind their international counterparts, the time is now to meet the following needs:

- **Local leadership training programs:** It is essential to assist city officials in learning how geopolitical trends affect cities and vice versa. Training is critical for mayors and local officials who manage international relationships, navigate global trends as they advance their constituents' interests, and coordinate complex multi-stakeholder initiatives.
- **Constituent engagement:** Voters might not fully appreciate how geopolitical issues hit home and city officials may need to more effectively communicate their expanded responsibilities. In order to build this work into constituent relations, city leaders in charge of public affairs need training and awareness, as well as an accurate and ongoing account of the city's work.



- **Data and evidence:** City officials need to be able to track and report on impact from international engagements, so results are visible to residents. This means building and accessing aggregate data sources and performance management systems, and sharing ideas and analysis with the public.
- **Sustainable funding mechanisms:** The lagging geopolitical capabilities of local officials require an investment of consistent, flexible resources. U.S. cities often compete against each other for scarce and conditional resources to support city engagement in international affairs, which sets back U.S. cities relative to their international peers.
- **Federal Coordination:** In order to benefit from local geopolitical expertise and experience which does exist, federal agencies should develop formal channels for local input to shape relevant policy areas. This could include incentives for city officials to set their own international agendas and engage with each other domestically and internationally, rather than channeling local entities toward a singular federal perspective. While foreign policy is primarily directed by the federal government, this coordination should respect geopolitical agency and autonomy of municipal governments, and the aggregate power of U.S. cities.

Implications for American Cities

At a moment when U.S. economic, diplomatic, and strategic leadership has largely shaped the drivers and norms of globalization, many countries seek continuity. Global challenges increasingly require local solutions, and city leaders are well poised to become more sophisticated, empowered global actors. This is increasingly essential not just to their roles but to America's competitive position. If city officials do not develop systems and capabilities to translate global and geopolitical challenges to local political debates and participate in creating solutions, America will fall behind both allies and adversaries.

Local leaders need training to understand how their communities fit into broader geopolitical contexts, resources to design and implement international strategies tailored to local needs, and mechanisms to coordinate with federal officials as respected partners rather than an afterthought or bystanders to international relations.

As national leadership upends established norms in foreign affairs, local leaders are on the front lines of rapid change. The question is not whether American cities will continue to engage internationally—they will, because global challenges require local responses and many local problems benefit from global cooperation. The question is whether international engagement by local leaders will be well-informed, strategic, coordinated, and well-supported, or whether it will continue to be improvised and constrained by minimal resources in ways that limit effectiveness and create vulnerabilities.



About Leigh O'Neill

Leigh O'Neill is a Senior Advisor at the Institute for Global Affairs at Eurasia Group where she leads global affairs education for city officials.

Before joining Institute for Global Affairs, she was Chief Strategy and Operations Officer at the Inclusive Abundance Initiative, a public policy initiative of a family foundation. Previously, Leigh was Senior Director for Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Programs at Bloomberg Philanthropies, where she oversaw investments in leadership programming for global mayors at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard. She also served as Chief of Staff for Bloomberg Philanthropies' Government Innovation portfolio.

Prior to her time in philanthropy, Leigh was Managing Director for Policy and Legislative Affairs at the Truman National Security Project. She also served as staff in the United States Senate, including for the Committee on Foreign Relations Professional Staff for the Middle East. Leigh was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to study the impact of free trade on sustainable economic development in Jordan and has participated in three international election observation missions in Jordan (2010) and Lebanon (2009 & 2022).

Leigh received a B.A. in Classical Studies from Boston College and an M.A. in American Foreign Policy and International Economics from SAIS at Johns Hopkins University. Leigh is a proud Boston native and lifelong Red Sox fan.

About IGA

Geopolitical literacy – the ability to make sense of world events – is fundamental to engaged citizenship in a globally interconnected world. From youth and underserved communities to civic and business leaders, the Institute for Global Affairs (IGA), an independent nonprofit organization housed at Eurasia Group, gives people the tools to navigate global challenges, foster civic engagement, and be informed decision-makers.

Launched in 2016 by political scientist Ian Bremmer – founder of Eurasia Group and president of IGA's board – IGA stands out among its peers by combining the analytical depth of a think tank, the agility of a start-up, and the mission-driven ethos of an educational organization. It works to inspire curiosity and promote public knowledge of global issues and geopolitics and, in doing so, reduce polarization, diversify foreign policymaking, and mitigate distrust in democratic governance.



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