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LA Can Influence Foreign Policy Through City Diplomacy [1]

As I read commentary on President Trump's decision to assassinate Qassim Soleimani, I feel the urge to take a step back and see if this signals a bigger problem, again. This is the same problem that should have been raised more when the United States left the JCPOA (the nuclear agreement with Iran), or the Paris Climate Agreement, or when the U.S. president called certain countries "sh**holes": The United States relies too heavily on hard power likely because the nation underappreciates noncoercive foreign affairs, global engagement and diplomacy.

The *public*'s reluctance to contemplate noncoercive statecraft sits at the heart of the problem of America's shrinking global influence. It is a problem if Americans think that a strong military is enough to ensure national security.

As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Duckenfield mentioned in a 2015 visit to

CPD, many Americans do not know the purpose of the Department of State (DOS) and might even think that DOS oversees matters related to the country's own 50 states. In 2013, only 10 percent of young Americans thought that "America should be more globally proactive." In 2016, Americans continued to be "wary of global involvement." Consistent with public attitude, in recent years, less than one percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign affairs, which means a 12 percent cut in foreign affairs spending compared to 2010. Americans are nonetheless in favor of increasing defense spending, as evidenced by Congress's approval to increase U.S. military spending for the fifth consecutive year. This suggests that the nation is in fact concerned about national security but associates that solely with defense, resulting in potential missed opportunities for better security enhancement.

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By killing Soleimani, Trump has handed the hardliners in Iran all they could wish for: the U.S. is expelled from Iraq; Iranians are remarkably united as if the recent protests did not even happen; animosity toward the U.S. has increased across the region among many, including various Shia groups who are likely to act more boldly in revenge. With Trump's latest threat to bomb Iranian cultural sites, even pro-monarchy Iranian expats are turning anti-Trump. The winning hand seems to be held by the people who deem it okay to attack an embassy, brutally crack down on civilians, disregard diplomatically negotiated international deals, orchestrate coups, chant "death to" or threaten to bomb cultural sites. The losers here, unfortunately, are pro-diplomacy and pro-engagement people on both sides who are critical of the hardliners in power.

Overall, the Iranian people, being the most pro-Western and least anti-Semitic in the Middle East, who could be a great ally for the American people, are growing more estranged. This begs for increased global engagement between the people of Iran and the people of the United States. What better place for this than Los Angeles. What better avenue than city diplomacy that centers on global engagement.

At the Second Los Angeles Summit on City Diplomacy hosted by CPD at the USC Annenberg School, Deputy Mayor Nina Hachigian emphasized that the M-ayor's Office of International Affairs can play the bridging role for Americans to expand their understanding of diplomatic and international affairs. The office is currently doing this through international exchange programs and aligning the city's development goals with those of the UN.

But we can move this even further. Take the example of the U.S.'s Iran policy. Instead of the repetitive, highly partisan rhetoric that comes from D.C., we can tap into the diverse and creative nature of Angelenos and rethink some of the policy problems together, facilitated by city diplomats and away from the boxed thinking of D.C. Perhaps this is one way to increase appreciation for the work that our diplomats do. Los Angeles is home to the largest Iranian community outside of Iran. It is also home to people of all stripes from across the U.S. who would probably appreciate a more nuanced conversation about U.S.-Iran relations that highlights the impacts of isolationist policies and actions, from sanctions and travel ban to embassy attacks. These actions make hardliners, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards

Corps, stronger and more influential, and they ultimately drag us into a war or decreased global influence.

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If we, the people of the U.S. and Iran, more specifically LA and Tehran, realize that we have much more in common with each other than we do with our respective national governments, then we can come together and promote global engagement, people-to-people exchanges and diplomacy. This is exactly what the hardliners on both sides, such as Khamenei, fear: global engagement. City diplomacy at its core is about global engagement. We need to embrace it now more than ever to find solutions that enhance national security without relying too much on our military or on sanctions. Similarly, I hope that people will praise or criticize Trump not based on preconceived opinions of him, but based on whether or not the president of the United States makes valid arguments about international affairs.

The geographic distance of the U.S. from much of the world has until recent decades given it the privilege of declining to be engaged in certain aspects of global affairs. But such privilege does not exist anymore. In our hyper-connected world, politics, economies and communities don’t end at country borders. We can't afford to rely only on our strong military and refuse to engage with the rest of the world in a more meaningful way. Cities, specifically their offices of International Affairs, seem to be perfectly situated to tackle this issue because they are at the center of the network. They are part of the government system and yet are more closely connected to people and businesses.

The next phase for this effort is to shape a citizenry that is more informed about and engaged with world affairs, in addition to domestic affairs, so that our democracy can thrive in the 21st century. CPD is researching ways through which the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office can better engage LA residents, inform them about the importance of global engagement, and be informed by them about their global policy aspirations. Ultimately, increased public appreciation for diplomacy paves the way for a democratically elected president who appreciates a more balanced and responsible statecraft that is not so heavily military-oriented.