



# Mega-city-states

## Increasing competition between cities overrides national priorities as mayors lead bold initiatives to place their cities at the forefront of the global stage.

In the Judge Dredd comic book series, Mega-City One is a huge fictional city-state covering much of the eastern United States, linking an urban corridor stretching from Atlanta to Quebec. With a population of over 400 million it is one of around thirty mega-cities that dominate the world, and outside which, in Cursed Earth, there is no law. It's true that this is an extreme view of life in the 22nd century, but some would say that the growth and importance of mega-cities is very much a 21st-century issue.

Today, many see that cities rather than nations are taking the big steps forward, introducing new approaches, adopting new strategies and generating more growth for the world. After a couple of centuries where nations drove the agenda, some people suggest that we are witnessing a rebirth of Roman, medieval and even 19th-century times, as cities become the centre of attention, exert influence and become magnets for innovation. By 2020, it is clear that the new mega-cities will not only be the beacons for the future but also that they will both cooperate and compete with one another.

City-states of the past have been the centres of power, of culture and of trade. From the ancient Greek cities of Athens, Sparta and Corinth, the Sumerian cities of Babylon and Ur, and Rome at the heart of the Roman Empire through to central Asian cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, and the powerful Italian cities of the Middle Ages, city-states have had

a central role in history. Largely independent entities with a focus on the urban centre, city-states have been run in the interests of their citizens rather than the wider regions within which they are situated. Cities such as Venice, Florence and Genoa defined their era and, in the 19th century, sovereign city-states in Germany and Switzerland including Geneva, Frankfurt, Bremen, Lubeck and Basel adopted a similar ambition. Although today we only have a few sovereign city-states left – namely, Singapore, the Vatican City and Monaco – we do have a number of urban areas that have a high degree of autonomy and essentially function as city-states within the nations they belong to: Canberra, Vienna, Brussels, Geneva, Hamburg, Moscow, Brasilia and Buenos Aires all come to mind. In addition, we have cities such as Washington DC, Mexico City, Islamabad, New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur that are federally administered as well as places like Hong Kong and Macau which operate as autonomous cities in China. Although arguably not yet as directly influential as the city-states of the past, many predict that some of these, and other notable additions, will become the natural drivers of change in the future.

In 1993, an article in *Foreign Affairs*, 'The Rise of the Region State', suggested that: 'The nation-state has become a dysfunctional unit for understanding and managing the flows of economic activity that dominate today's borderless world. Policymakers, politicians and corporate managers would benefit

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from looking at “region-states” – the globe’s natural economic zones – whether they happen to fall within or across traditional political boundaries. With their efficient scales of consumption, infrastructure and professional services, region-states make ideal entryways into the global economy. If allowed to pursue their own economic interests without jealous government interference, the prosperity of these areas will eventually spill over.’

Sixteen years later, Parag Khanna, Director of the Global Governance Initiative at the New America Foundation, wrote an article for *Foreign Policy* entitled ‘The Next Big Thing: Neomedievalism’ in which he proposed that, ‘as countries stumble to right the wrongs of the corporate masters of the universe, they are driving us right back to a future that looks like nothing more than a new Middle Ages, that centuries-long period of amorphous conflict from the 5th to the 15th century when city states mattered as much as countries. ... Today, just forty city-regions account for two-thirds of the world economy and 90% of its innovation. The mighty Hanseatic League, a constellation of well-armed North and Baltic Sea trading hubs in the late Middle Ages, will be reborn as cities such as Hamburg and Dubai form commercial alliances and operate “free zones” across Africa like the ones Dubai Ports World is building. Add in sovereign wealth funds and private military contractors, and you have the agile geopolitical units of a neomedieval world.’

In his seminal book, *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis saw that, in the future, Los Angeles will have become a concentration of competing smaller city-states. By contrast Paul Saffo has commented that ‘our world is moving from one of nation-states to one of city-states. Rather than the future being one of the US versus China, it is going to be Silicon Valley vs. Beijing or Chicago vs. Paris. Each dominant city will define its region. With the “flattening” of the world, Chicago is no longer vying with US cities like New York for influence, commerce and jobs, but other major cities in the world.’ The MIT 19.20.21 programme is just one of several research studies under way that are looking at future urban environments. Predicting that there will be nineteen cities with over 20 million populations in the 21st century, this sees that ‘the rise of supercities is the defining megatrend of the 21st century’.

During the Future Agenda programme, the increasingly significant role of a group of elite cities was mentioned at a number of events. From trade to migration to innovation, the leadership of emerging mega-cities was rarely questioned. In some areas, we can already see examples of where cities are leading the way for change. For example, with the introduction of congestion zones in London and fat taxes in New York, cities are doing things that national governments will not. In the absence of agreement on climate change between the world’s nations in Copenhagen in 2009, a number of the world’s leading cities are taking action. The C40 cities see that they have a central role to play in tackling climate change and ‘by fostering a sense of shared purpose, the C40 network offers cities an effective forum in which to work together, share information and demonstrate leadership’. The mayors, chief ministers and governors of these cities believe that

with their Climate Change Action Plans they can collectively do something that nations seem to be unable to do.

Multinational businesses increasingly differentiate global urban markets from national ones and create specific products and services targeted on the common needs of rising mega-city populations. In terms of market focus, companies can see more in common between Shanghai, Mumbai and New York than they can between New York and Idaho. Mega-cities are already highly attractive markets in their own right and, as they grow, their influence will spread. As Neal Peirce of McKinsey has put it, 'National economies essentially are constellations of regional economies, each with a major city at the core.' In an event in Singapore it was highlighted that 'forty-five years ago, Singapore was not urbanised and there were slums around the city centre. However, being a city-state put Singapore in a unique position to tackle this challenge. The government from the very beginning took a great interest in how the city should urbanise – what policy frameworks should be adopted. Thus Singapore's urbanisation happened in a very planned manner.'

The phenomenon of the so-called 'endless city' has been explored in a number of areas, including the Urban Age project led by the London School of Economics. According to UN-Habitat, 'larger

combinations of urban areas will be one of the most significant developments in the way people live and economies grow in the next fifty years'. The world's mega-cities are merging to form vast 'mega-regions' which may stretch hundreds of kilometres across countries and be home to more than 100 million people. The world's first mega-city, comprising Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, is already home to about 120 million people. Other mega-regions have formed in Japan and Brazil and are developing in India, West Africa and elsewhere. The top twenty-five cities in the world account for more than half of the world's wealth and the five largest cities in India and China now account for 50% of those countries' wealth. Nagoya-Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe is expected to have a population of 60 million by 2015 and will effectively be the powerhouse of Japan; a similar effect on an even larger scale is occurring in fast-growing 'urban corridors' such as that between Mumbai and Delhi.

By 2020, we can expect that, alongside a few select intergovernmental programmes and more regional economic partnerships, the catalysts for major change in the world will increasingly come from the forty or so mega-cities that drive the global economy, are home to many of its population and set the future agenda. Whether this will be a return to the role of city-states of the past or a version of the Judge Dredd future is, of course, open to question.



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