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The rise of global megacities as independent political actors: The cases of Singapore and Seoul

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to identify the institutional patterns underlying the development of political agency in the global megacities of Singapore and Seoul. The methodological basis of the study was a comprehensive comparative political and institutional analysis, utilising qualitative and structural-functional methods for analysing documents and case studies. The analysis confirmed that megacities have acquired the characteristics of independent political actors capable of shaping the international order through institutional, network-based and diplomatic mechanisms. A comparison of the concepts of the global city, urban diplomacy, paradiplomacy, and multi-level and network governance revealed that each of these concepts explained a distinct level of cities' political activity, whilst their combination formed a comprehensive model of political agency. An analysis of Singapore demonstrated that international influence is achieved through the integration of state sovereignty, strategic planning and a unified system of political coordination. The study of Seoul revealed a different model, in which the lack of international legal personality is offset by active participation in global urban networks, the development of digital governance and the export of governance practices. A comparative analysis of international activity identified differences between the vertical diplomacy of a city-state and the horizontal network of partnerships characteristic of a municipal metropolis. A synthesis of the results revealed that the potential for international scaling was greater in the Seoul model, whilst the Singapore model retained its unique character through the combination of the functions of a sovereign state and a global city. The findings are intended for use by government bodies, municipal administrations, strategic planning centres and researchers in the field of urban governance when developing models of international integration, digital development programmes and strategies to strengthen the political agency of major cities

Keywords: global governance; economic diplomacy; climate diplomacy; international branding; international agenda; digital governance

INTRODUCTION

The global transformation of the international system is accompanied by a gradual expansion of the range of actors capable of influencing processes of global governance. Megacities have ceased to perform solely administrative, economic or social functions, taking on the characteristics of autonomous political actors that form international partnerships, develop diplomatic networks, promote their own models of governance and serve as platforms for the formulation of global policies. The intensification of urbanisation, digital transformation, environmental challenges, and international competition for investment and human capital has brought to the fore the issue of cities' political agency, the mechanisms for its institutionalisation, and models for integrating megacities into the system of multilevel governance. Comparing cities that follow different institutional trajectories in their international activities is becoming increasingly important. Singapore and Seoul are influential Asian megacities; however, their international status, legal capacities, organisation of the political cycle and mechanisms for external engagement have been shaped by different models. This distinction provides a basis for identifying the factors that determine the effectiveness of urban diplomacy, strategic planning and the international positioning of global cities.

The development of the international role of megacities was examined through the interrelationship between digital transformation, place branding and investment attractiveness. A study by R.G. Sousa *et al.* (2025) summarised the main conceptual approaches to integrating place branding with Smart City models and demonstrated that

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the competitiveness of cities is determined not by individual marketing tools, but by a combination of institutional policy, digital infrastructure, environmental sustainability and engagement with stakeholders. The authors concluded that the synergy between place branding and digital governance has created favourable conditions for attracting foreign direct investment and strengthening the international positioning of cities. The issue of adapting governance models to the specific characteristics of individual regions was further explored in the work of D. Kundu *et al.* (2026). The authors formulated a conceptual vision of urban policy for countries of the Global South and demonstrated that simply replicating models developed in developed countries does not ensure adequate effectiveness. The analysis conducted highlighted the role of institutional adaptability, financial decentralisation, community participation and local consideration of socio-economic conditions for the long-term development of cities.

The educational dimension of the political agency of megacities was explored through the concept of learning cities. Q.A. Dang (2025) systematised international experience in the development of Learning Cities and demonstrated that the South Korean model had transformed lifelong learning into one of the fundamental elements of urban governance. The author established that the integration of educational policy into strategic planning contributes to the development of human capital, the expansion of local community participation, and the strengthening of cities' competitive advantages in the global knowledge economy. The implementation of long-term development strategies for megacities was examined through an analysis of the political economy of sustainable development. B.M. Musthofa *et al.* (2025) highlighted the fundamental differences between the Jakarta and Seoul models, demonstrating how sustainable tourism policy depends on the national institutional architecture. The authors concluded that the success of urban strategies is determined not by universal standards, but by their alignment with the historical, political and economic characteristics of each state. The transformation of the state's role in the development of megacities was explained differently in the work by H.B. Shin & D.-W. Gimm (2025). The researchers justified the persistence of developmentalist governance mechanisms even amidst the spread of neoliberal reforms and demonstrated that the implementation of large-scale urban projects remains the result of interaction between state institutions, private capital and multi-level political coalitions. This interpretation explains the persistence of active state involvement in the shaping of urban space in Asian economies.

Digital governance and the international regulation of artificial intelligence have become a distinct area of urban studies. S.S. Lim & G. Chng (2024) analysed the establishment of the AI Verify Foundation in Singapore and demonstrated that this new model brought together government bodies, global technology corporations and the academic community into a single platform for testing artificial intelligence algorithms. The researchers concluded that proactive regulation of digital technologies has become one of the factors contributing to Singapore's international standing in the field of digital policy. The issue of economic sustainability in megacities was further explored in the work by Y.E. Kim *et al.* (2025). The authors found that economic growth in South Korean cities is not always accompanied by demographic recovery, and that knowledge-intensive services have become crucial for maintaining competitiveness. The calculations carried out demonstrated the interdependence of the development of innovative sectors, housing affordability and the long-term economic sustainability of urban areas. The European dimension of global city development was examined in the work by A. Vaňová *et al.* (2023). The authors demonstrated that London and Paris function as international hubs for interaction between Europe and the Indo-Pacific region due to the integration of transport, economic, scientific and institutional networks. The findings confirmed the growing role of multi-level governance, open planning and cross-sectoral coordination in the development of megacities.

Previous studies have examined in detail specific aspects of global cities' international activities; however, they have not provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of the institutional models of political agency in Singapore and Seoul as alternative mechanisms for integration into the system of global governance. The aim of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the characteristics of the formation of political agency in Singapore and Seoul as global megacities within the system of international governance. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to compare the conceptual models of urban political agency and the institutional organisation of the international activities of both megacities; to identify differences in the mechanisms by which Singapore and Seoul integrate into global political networks; and to determine the factors ensuring the effectiveness of their international interaction and the potential for scaling up the established governance models.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological framework of the study was structured as a qualitative comparative political-institutional study, based on a combination of theoretical analysis, institutional analysis, analysis of political documents, content analysis of official sources, the historical-political method, the method of conceptual comparison, structural-functional analysis and comparative case analysis. The main body of sources comprised materials published between 2020 and 2026; earlier works were used exclusively to establish the theoretical framework of the study, necessary to explain the evolution of the political agency of global cities. The study of the transformation of the role of megacities in the system of international relations was carried out using the historical-political method when analysing the development of the Westphalian system of international relations (Matviienko, 2025) and the subsequent evolution of global governance through 2026. Theoretical analysis was used

to interpret the concepts of the "Global City", multi-level governance, paradiplomacy, urban diplomacy and network governance. The source materials included the the United Nations Statistical Commission (2020), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) (OECD & UN-Habitat 2024), and the World Cities Report 2024 (UN-Habitat, 2024b).

The method of conceptual comparison was used in preparing a comparative analysis of the main concepts of political agency in global cities. The criteria for comparison were the concept, the core idea, the mechanisms of political agency, the main policy instruments, empirical evidence and international indicators. The empirical basis was provided by the works of G. Marks & L. Hooghe (2003), S. Bouteligier (2013) and the Z/Yen Group & China Development Institute (2025). Studies by R. Tavares (2016), M. Acuto *et al.* (2021) and the Global Power City Index 2024 (2024) were also analysed. In addition, publications by the OECD (2024, 2025) and a study by M. Alkanalka (2024) were utilised. The comparison was also based on works by C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), and UCLG-MEWA (n.d.). The interpretation was carried out by identifying functional differences between individual theoretical approaches and determining their role in explaining the political agency of megacities.

The study of international instruments of political influence exercised by megacities was based on a qualitative comparative analysis of case studies. Singapore and Seoul were selected as contrasting case studies due to their fundamentally different institutional statuses. Singapore combined the functions of a sovereign state and a global city, which allowed for the examination of an integrated model of political governance. Seoul represented a model of a large municipality with extensive autonomy, operating within a framework of multi-level governance without international legal personality. Spatial planning was analysed through documents from the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA, n.d.a; URA, n.d.b), in particular the long-term development plan and the Master Plan. Digital transformation and climate policy were examined on the basis of the Smart Nation 2.0 strategy (Smart Nation Singapore, 2025) and the Inter-ministerial Committee on Climate Change (National Climate Change Secretariat, 2026). The source base comprised official materials from the Prime Minister's Office, in particular the Prime Minister's speech at the launch of Smart Nation 2.0 (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2024) and information on the Strategy Group's mandate (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Strategy Group, 2026; Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office, n.d.). The legislative process was analysed using materials from the Attorney-General's Chambers (2025), whilst spatial planning was examined using documents from the URA (2025). A structural-functional analysis was applied to examine the institutional framework. The criteria were the stage of the political process, the main institutions, and practical implementation.

The study of Seoul was carried out using a similar methodological framework. The source materials were the Act of the Republic of Korea No. 4371 (1991) and Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781 (2020). Additionally, the Framework Ordinance on Informatisation SMG (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2021) and materials from the Seoul 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.a) were consulted. The analysis of advisory bodies was carried out on the basis of materials on the Smart City Committee (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.b) and studies by the M. Byun & J. Yoon (2023). The criteria of stage, institutions and practical content were used to construct the institutional diagram. A comparison of the international activities of Singapore and Seoul was carried out using the comparative case study method. The criteria were: city, area of international activity, main instruments, and indicators of the city's international activity. The material basis consisted of official documents from the Seoul Metropolitan Government (2019) regarding the WeGO (World Smart Sustainable Cities Organisation) Mayors' Conference – ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the report by the Centre for Liveable Cities on the 2024 World Cities Summit (2024). In addition, analytical materials from the Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore (2025) on integrated planning and information on WeGO's (2024; 2026) activities were utilised. In the field of digital diplomacy, data from the Singapore Cooperation Programme (2025) and materials from GovTech Singapore (2026) on international cooperation were utilised.

Dubai, London and Barcelona were included in the analysis as additional illustrative examples of various mechanisms of international political engagement. Dubai was selected due to its role as one of the world's leading financial centres, where economic diplomacy was integrated with global financial flows through the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC, 2025). London was used as an example of digital governance owing to the development of digital public services. Barcelona was chosen due to its long-standing use of international branding as a tool for political positioning, as confirmed by the Barcelona City Council (2024, 2026). The analysis of climate diplomacy was based on materials from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (n.d.) and C40 Cities (2024a; 2024b). To assess the activities of international networks, data from UCLG-MEWA (n.d.) and Metropolis (n.d.) were utilised. The interpretation was based on a comparison of the functional purposes of economic diplomacy, climate diplomacy, digital governance, international branding and network interaction. The final comparison of political agency was carried out using the method of multi-criteria comparative analysis. The assessment was conducted according to the following criteria: the source of international political legitimacy, type of international political influence, mechanism for building international authority, political stability of the international model, geography of international influence, resources for political influence, capacity to export policies, extent of integration

into global governance, vulnerability of the model of political agency, and potential for other cities to scale up the model. The materials for the comparative analysis comprised works examining the theoretical foundations of global cities (Sassen, 2001; Kamiński & Matiaszczyk, 2023; Joo, 2023). In addition, studies analysing Singapore's sovereign strategies (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024), the impact of the pandemic on smart city policies (Woods *et al.*, 2025) and Seoul's foreign policy priorities (Lee, 2025) were utilised. The prospects for strengthening the role of these megacities in global governance were identified by extrapolating the identified trends in the areas of climate diplomacy, digital governance and knowledge diplomacy, using materials from international organisations (COP29 Declaration…, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2024a; European Commission, 2024). On this basis, risks associated with institutional and legal constraints on the political agency of Singapore and Seoul had been identified.

RESULTS

The transformation of global megacities into independent political actors within the international system

The formation of a system of global governance was accompanied by a re-examination of the classical model of international relations, within which states were regarded as the sole, fully-fledged holders of political power. The Westphalian system, which took shape following the conclusion of the peace treaties of 1648, enshrined the principles of territorial sovereignty, the legal equality of states and non-interference in internal affairs (Matviienko, 2025). It was at the state level that political decision-making and international interaction primarily took place. Globalisation, digitalisation, the rapid growth of transnational economic ties and the concentration of human capital in large urban agglomerations had gradually transformed the architecture of political power. Decision-making centres extended beyond the confines of national governments, whilst cities were becoming independent actors in international politics, capable of formulating their own foreign policies, participating in international networks and influencing the development of global norms. Such a transformation did not imply a weakening of state sovereignty. It involved a redistribution of functions between different levels of governance. Multi-level governance entailed the simultaneous functioning of local, regional, national and supranational levels of decision-making, between which robust coordination mechanisms emerged (Panke & Stapel, 2024). It was cities that were being granted powers in the areas of transport policy, digital transformation, climate governance, economic development, international cooperation and attracting investment. The OECD & UN-Habitat (2024) had shown that over 80% of the 78 countries studied already had national urban policies that provided for the expansion of the role of local authorities in the implementation of state development strategies and the integration of cities into international governance mechanisms.

This rethinking of the role of cities had resulted not only from institutional reforms but also from fundamental changes in the global economy. Production was no longer dependent on the geographical location of natural resources and was concentrated around financial centres, innovation ecosystems, universities, a highly skilled workforce and digital infrastructure. Such conditions had fostered the emergence of a new type of urbanised space, functioning as hubs for global flows of capital, information, technology and human resources. The political weight of these centres was determined not by their administrative status, but by their ability to integrate into international networks and influence decision-making beyond the borders of their own state. A conceptual explanation of this phenomenon was proposed by S. Sassen (2001) in her theory of global cities. In contrast to the traditional understanding of large cities as administrative or industrial centres, the Global City concept viewed them as strategic nodes of global economic governance, where the headquarters of transnational corporations, financial institutions, legal firms, consultancy networks, digital platforms and international decision-making centres were concentrated. The evolution of this concept demonstrated a shift in emphasis from economic concentration towards the political functionality of cities as political actors capable of shaping the international order through climate diplomacy, digital standards, migration policy and participation in transnational coalitions (Acuto *et al.*, 2021).

The growing political significance of cities was closely linked to changes in the nature of urbanisation. According to OECD estimates, the urban population more than doubled between 1975 and 2015 – from 1.5 to 3.5 billion people (OECD & UN-Habitat, 2024). New international standards for the classification of urban areas, adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission (2020), had made it possible to consider functional urban agglomerations as distinct socio-economic systems, regardless of administrative boundaries. This method, known as the "Degree of Urbanisation", classified a country's territory into three categories – cities, towns and semi-urban areas, and rural areas – and added a suburban zone around each city to create a Functional Urban Area, enabling international statistical comparisons regardless of national definitions. Urbanisation had also altered the structure of political powers. City administrations were being given their own tools for regulatory policy, the management of innovation clusters, the development of transport infrastructure, the implementation of climate programmes and international economic cooperation. National governments performed a strategic coordination role, whilst the operational management of complex urbanised systems was concentrated at the level of megacities. A similar trend could be observed in many countries, regardless of their form of government, as it was cities that respond more quickly to technological change, migration processes and the challenges of sustainable development. The World Cities Report 2024 (UN-Habitat, 2024b) highlighted the dual nature of

megacities: they concentrated a proportion of economic activity and innovative potential, whilst remaining vulnerable to global crises.

The formation of international urban networks had become one of the most notable manifestations of this trend. Such networks developed common standards, coordinated policies and represented the interests of megacities in international negotiations. A prime example was C40 Cities (n.d.), which brought together 96 of the world's largest cities. The organisation represented the interests of mayors at UN climate conferences, G20 summits and other international forums, promoting mechanisms for funding urban climate programmes and reforming international environmental policy. In effect, a new form of diplomacy was emerging, in which city governments were given the opportunity to influence international negotiations alongside nation states. The political autonomisation of cities did not signify the emergence of an alternative system of international relations. Rather, it marked the emergence of a polycentric model of governance, where political influence was distributed across several interconnected levels. States remained the bearers of international legal personality; however, megacities set the agenda in areas requiring rapid adaptation to global changes.

The emergence of megacities as independent actors in international politics was accompanied by the development of a distinct theoretical framework that explained the mechanisms through which they influenced global political processes. This approach had emerged at the intersection of international relations theory, political geography, urban studies and public administration. The development of theoretical models of urban policy reflected the evolution of the very nature of global governance. Each of the concepts set out in Table 1 described a distinct mechanism through which megacities exercised their political agency. Taken together, these approaches formed the theoretical basis for analysing global megacities as a new category of political actors.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of the main concepts of the political agency of global cities

Concept	Core idea	Mechanisms of political agency	Main political instruments	Empirical evidence and international indicators
Global City	Global cities concentrated economic, financial, informational and political resources, enabling them to influence the international agenda independently of state mechanisms.	Concentration of TNC headquarters, international financial centres, international organisations, universities and innovation clusters.	Financial diplomacy, international business forums, regulatory influence, and the development of international standards.	The Global Financial Centres Index 37 (2025) assessed 119 financial centres worldwide; the Global Power City Index 2024 evaluated 48 leading cities across six functional areas (economy, research, cultural interaction, liveability, environment and accessibility).
City Diplomacy	Cities engaged in international political representation through their own diplomatic channels without concluding intergovernmental agreements.	Bilateral agreements between cities, international offices, mayors' diplomacy, participation in global forums.	Political declarations, memoranda, international summits, municipal diplomatic missions, and thematic coalitions.	Urban20 (U20) was an official platform for interaction between cities and the G20. The network comprised the largest megacities of G20 countries, which prepare joint policy recommendations for the leaders of member states.
Paradiplomacy	Subnational governments engaged in international cooperation within areas under their jurisdiction without acquiring international legal personality.	Investment diplomacy, trade cooperation, cross-border projects, technological partnerships and academic cooperation.	Economic missions, international innovation programmes, cooperation agreements, and participation in international grant-funded projects.	Regional and local authorities were responsible for transport, spatial development, environmental policy, housing and some digital services, creating the institutional foundations for the development of paradiplomacy.
Multi-level Governance	Political decisions were shaped through interaction between local, regional, national and international levels of governance.	Coordination of competences, integration of local policies into international programmes, and multi-level funding.	Joint programmes, intergovernmental committees, international funds, and co-financing mechanisms.	The OECD identified multilevel governance as a fundamental principle for implementing sustainable development policies; the OECD regional policy toolkit provided a comprehensive system of indicators for assessing interaction between different levels of government.

Table 1. Continued

Concept	Core idea	Mechanisms of political agency	Main political instruments	Empirical evidence and international indicators
Network Governance	Governance was carried out through horizontal networks of cooperation between autonomous actors without a rigid hierarchy.	International city networks, expert platforms, policy exchange and the development of common standards.	Coordination of climate policy, digital governance and crisis management, and the exchange of governance practices.	As of 2025, C40 Cities brought together 96 cities representing 920 million people and 23% of the global economy. ICLEI comprised more than 2,500 local and regional governments from over 125 countries, while UCLG represented more than 240,000 local governments through its associations.

Note*:* TNCs – transnational corporations

Source: compiled by the author based on C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), UCLG-MEWA (n.d.), S. Sassen (2001), G. Marks & L. Hooghe (2003), S. Bouteligier (2013), R. Tavares (2016), M. Acuto *et al.* (2021), Global Power City Index 2024 (2024), M. Alkanalka (2024), OECD (2024; 2025), Z/Yen Group & China Development Institute (2025)

A comparative analysis had shown that these concepts did not compete with one another, but rather explained different levels of a single political process. The Global City concept identified the structural prerequisites for the emergence of international influence by megacities through the concentration of economic resources and global functions. Paradiplomacy and city diplomacy characterised the foreign-policy mechanisms through which this potential was exercised. The theory of multilevel governance revealed the institutional distribution of competences between the state and the city, while network governance explained the coordination of activities without the dominance of a single decision-making centre. Their combination reflected a model of international politics in which megacities functioned as economic centres, diplomatic platforms, coordinators of international networks and generators of new policy practices. It was precisely the synergy of these mechanisms that created the foundations for the development of cities' political autonomy in a globalised environment and explained their growing influence on global governance.

The international political influence of megacities was shaped through a combination of tools that integrated economic, diplomatic, technological and reputational mechanisms. Their effectiveness was determined not by the formal powers of city authorities, but by their ability to integrate local policies into global processes. Unlike state diplomacy, which relied on international law and intergovernmental agreements, megacities utilised the functional advantages of their own economies, innovation ecosystems, transport hubs, financial markets and digital infrastructure. Political influence in this model arose as a result of the concentration of resources and the city's capacity to propose solutions to global problems (Egyed *et al.*, 2024). This was precisely why the international activity of cities was assessed not by the number of agreements concluded, but by the scale of their contribution to the development of international standards, the formation of coalitions and the dissemination of successful governance practices. Economic diplomacy had emerged as one of the most effective mechanisms (Côté *et al.*, 2020). Its scope extended beyond the traditional attraction of foreign investment. Cities competed to host the headquarters of multinational corporations, high-tech manufacturing facilities, international exhibitions, research centres and financial institutions. Economic diplomacy was integrated with innovation policy and the development of human capital. A prime example was Dubai, which between 2015 and 2025 developed its own model of international positioning through the DIFC. According to official DIFC (2025) data, in 2024 the centre's ecosystem comprised 6,920 active companies, including 27 of the 29 global systemically important banks (G-SIBs), 8 of the world's 10 largest asset managers, over 410 capital management firms and 125 insurance companies, transforming the city into one of the financial hubs linking Europe, Asia and Africa. Such a concentration of international business strengthened the city's political influence, as it established a permanent channel of interaction with governments, international financial organisations and global investors.

Alongside economic mechanisms, climate diplomacy was developing. It had become one of the areas of international activity for megacities following the Paris Climate Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d.). Local governments took part in international negotiations, put forward their own climate programmes and promoted the interests of cities at global forums. The distinctive feature of this instrument lay in the practical nature of the policy. Cities presented concrete project outcomes rather than declarations, which enhanced their legitimacy in the international political arena. In 2024, the C40 network coordinated the mayors' participation in the Urban 20 summit and the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29), advocating for cities' direct access to climate finance, the development of multi-level governance, and the integration of urban climate strategies into global policy. During the G20 summit, the Urban 20 communiqué was officially presented to the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as the consolidated position of the world's largest cities, demonstrating the institutionalisation of urban diplomacy within the global political process (C40 Cities, 2024a). At the U20 in Rio de Janeiro, mayors called on national governments and development banks to provide at least USD 800 billion annually until 2030 to fund

urban climate actions, whilst at COP29 in Baku, they advocated for direct funding for cities and a greater role for them in national climate plans (C40 Cities, 2024b).

Digital governance had become another instrument of international political influence. Its significance was linked to the transition from the digitalisation of administrative procedures to the development of global standards for the use of data, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital services. In practice, megacities served as testing grounds for technological models that were subsequently adapted by other cities. An example was London, where, as part of the "Data for London" programme, the "Data for London Library" platform was established, providing access to more than 5,100 datasets and serving as a foundation for the development of artificial intelligence and digital public services (Greater London Authority, 2025). The political significance of digital governance lay in the fact that technological standards were gradually becoming an instrument of international normative influence. Cities that were the first to test new models of digital governance effectively shaped the subsequent direction of municipal policy development in other countries.

The expansion of international influence was facilitated by participation in transnational city networks. Their role had long gone beyond the exchange of experience. These networks functioned as political coalitions, expert platforms and mechanisms for formulating international recommendations. The largest of these remained C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), UCLG-MEWA (n.d.), Eurocities (n.d.) and Metropolis (n.d.). Their activities encompassed the preparation of joint positions for UN conferences, the coordination of climate policy, digital transformation, the development of sustainable mobility and urban financing. According to B. Riedemann (2025), as of 2024 the network brought together over 2,500 local and regional authorities worldwide, making it the largest global platform for municipal cooperation in the field of sustainable development. The final report of the Daring Cities 2024 forum (Riedemann, 2025) emphasised that it was precisely these city networks that served as one of the mechanisms for promoting the principles of multi-level governance during preparations for COP29.

The political influence of cities also depended on the effectiveness of international branding. In political economy, a city's brand was regarded as a strategic resource that built trust among international partners, enhanced investment attractiveness and strengthened its position in global competition (Anttiroiko, 2014). This was not merely a matter of tourist appeal, but of the city's reputation as a reliable hub for innovation, science, international business and the implementation of global initiatives. One successful example was Barcelona, which, following the Olympic Games, developed a long-term international branding strategy and, in the 2020s, integrated it with policies for the development of the digital economy, creative industries and technological entrepreneurship (Barcelona City Council, 2024). Hosting the Mobile World Congress secured the city's status as one of the world's centres for digital technology, creating a sustainable channel for engagement with international corporations, governments and technology organisations (Barcelona City Council, 2026). In this model, reputational capital became a tool for political influence, as the city gained the ability to shape the international agenda in areas related to the digital economy and innovation policy.

The combination of these tools demonstrated a qualitative transformation in the international role of megacities. Economic diplomacy ensured the concentration of global capital and institutions. Climate diplomacy integrated cities into the development of international environmental solutions. Digital governance shaped new technological standards for public administration. Transnational urban networks created channels of political coordination that operated in parallel with intergovernmental mechanisms. International branding converted economic and innovative competitiveness into political authority. The combination of these instruments explained why megacities were viewed not as administrative units of states, but as independent centres of global policy-making, capable of influencing international rules, financial flows and the development of transnational governance.

The political autonomisation of Singapore and Seoul in the global arena

Singapore's political agency was shaped by a unique institutional structure that had virtually no parallel amongst the world's major cities. Unlike most cities worldwide, where the municipal level operated within a system of multi-level governance, Singapore was simultaneously a sovereign state, a capital city and a single urban entity (Schenk, 2017). This model eliminated the traditional division between central and municipal authorities, thereby reducing institutional costs in policy-making. All strategic decisions were integrated into a single system of public administration, where ministries, government agencies and the Prime Minister's Office operated as interconnected elements of a single policy cycle. It was this feature that explained Singapore's ability to implement large-scale transformations more quickly than most other megacities, where decisions had to be coordinated across several levels of government. The work of the Strategy Group within the Prime Minister's Office was specifically focused on cross-sectoral strategic foresight and policy coordination in the areas of demography, climate, economic transformation and public administration, ensuring a unified approach to long-term decision-making (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2026).

A distinctive feature of the Singaporean model was the primacy of strategic planning over reactive management (Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore, 2025). Spatial development was governed by a framework of documents drawn up by the URA. The Long-Term Plan (formerly the Concept Plan) set out the spatial development framework for approximately half a century ahead (URA, n.d.a), whilst the Master Plan was reviewed every five years and detailed land

use, the development of transport infrastructure, housing stock and economic zones (URA, n.d.b). In 2025-2026, the URA was conducting a new cycle of the Long-Term Plan Review with broad involvement from the public, the business community and the expert community, demonstrating a combination of centralised governance with mechanisms of consultative democracy. Policy-making relied on digital coordination. Following the establishment of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office and the transfer of GovTech to the coordination of the Prime Minister's Office, digital tools had become an integral part of virtually every stage of public administration. In October 2024, the government presented the Smart Nation 2.0 programme, which shifted the focus of digital policy (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2024). Whilst the first strategy was geared towards the digitalisation of public services, the new model concentrated on three areas: Trust, Growth and Community. The political significance of this transformation lay in the fact that digital technologies were no longer viewed as a separate sector of public policy. They were integrated into the decision-making process regarding economic development, healthcare, transport infrastructure, security and urban planning. The strategic decision-making process in Singapore was outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Institutional framework for strategic political decision-making in Singapore

Stage of the policy process	Key institutions	Practical implementation
Identification of strategic challenges	Prime Minister's Office, Strategy Group	Analysis of demographic trends, geopolitical risks, climate change and the digital economy, together with long-term forecasting of the country's development.
Setting the political agenda	Cabinet; MND; MTI; MOT; MDDI	Determination of national priorities, preparation of cross-sectoral development programmes, and allocation of responsibilities among ministries.
Policy formulation	URA, HDB, LTA, EDB, GovTech	Scenario modelling, analysis of economic impacts, digital mapping, transport modelling, and forecasting of land-use patterns.
Inter-departmental coordination	Cabinet Committees; Prime Minister's Office	Coordination of legislative, financial and institutional decisions across ministries prior to the approval of government policy.
Strategic approval	Cabinet	Approval of the Long-Term Plan, Master Plan, Smart Nation 2.0, and national digital and economic strategies.
Implementation	Statutory boards (URA, HDB, LTA, GovTech, EDB)	Implementation of infrastructure projects, housing programmes, digital platforms, transport reforms and investment policy.
Monitoring and adjustment	GovTech; Strategy Group; line ministries	Use of digital analytics, assessment of programme performance, and updating of strategic documents and budgetary priorities.

Note: MND – Ministry of National Development, MTI – Ministry of Trade and Industry, MOT – Ministry of Transport, MDDI – Ministry of Digital Development and Information, HDB – Housing and Development Board, LTA – Land Transport Authority, EDB – Economic Development Board

Source: compiled by the author based on Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office (n.d.), Prime Minister's Office Singapore (2024), URA (2025), Smart Nation Singapore (2025), Attorney-General's Chambers (2025), National Climate Change Secretariat (2026), Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Strategy Group (2026)

The institutional diagram had shown that the political cycle in Singapore was distinctly integrated in nature. The coordinating centre was not a separate local authority, but the Prime Minister's Office, which combined strategic forecasting, inter-departmental coordination and oversight of the implementation of government policy. Sectoral agencies were granted administrative autonomy in the implementation of programmes, yet strategic priorities remained uniform across the entire system. It was precisely this combination of centralised political leadership, functional specialisation of agencies, digital governance and long-term planning that had created a model enabling Singapore to maintain a stable political course regardless of changes to individual government programmes, whilst ensuring that urban development adapted rapidly to global economic and technological transformations.

Seoul's institutional model was based on a combination of administrative autonomy, enshrined in the legislation of the Republic of Korea, and a high level of coordination with the central government (Act of the Republic of Korea No. 4371, 1991). The city had the status of a Special City, which granted it broader powers compared with other municipalities in the country. Executive power was exercised by the SMG, headed by a mayor elected by direct vote for a four-year term, whilst representative and oversight functions were carried out by the Seoul Metropolitan Council. Unlike the classical municipal model, most strategic decisions in Seoul underwent several stages of institutional consultation, which included administrative, expert and representative assessment (Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781, 2020). It was precisely this structure that allowed local political autonomy to be reconciled with national strategic objectives. Spatial planning was carried out through the Seoul 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.a) – a document that set out the city's development over a twenty-year period. The plan envisaged six structural transformations, including the move away from traditional functional zoning (Beyond Zoning), the creation of a network of 61 waterfront public spaces, the development of a polycentric urban structure centred on three functional cores, the integration of new transport hubs for autonomous transport and Urban Air Mobility, and the removal of the

strict 35-storey height restriction on buildings. These decisions were not standalone urban planning projects. They were approved as elements of a unified policy for the spatial, economic and social development of the metropolis.

Digital governance was integrated into the policy-making process rather than functioning as a separate administrative function. The Framework Ordinance on Informatisation placed the responsibility on the mayor to approve the Master Plan for digital development and to draw up an annual Implementation Plan, which set out specific measures, funding, performance indicators and the officials responsible for implementation. In effect, every major management decision went through a cycle of "long-term plan – annual implementation plan – performance evaluation – policy adjustment", which ensured the continuity of strategic management regardless of the political climate (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2021). The decision-making process in Seoul was illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Institutional framework of strategic political decision-making in Seoul

Stage	Institutions	Practical content
Strategic identification of issues	Mayor of Seoul; Planning & Coordination Office; Seoul Institute	Analysis of demographic trends, transport flows, the housing market, climate risks and the digital economy; preparation of forecasting models for the city's development.
Policy development	Urban Planning Bureau; Digital Policy Office; Climate & Environment Headquarters; Transport Bureau	Development of programme proposals, economic calculations, regulatory analysis, budget proposals and performance indicators.
Expert consultation	Smart City Committee; Seoul Institute; universities; the private sector	Evaluation of the Master Plan, assessment of project feasibility, and verification of compliance with the Smart City Act. In 2024, the Smart City Committee consisted of 22 members.
Political approval	Seoul Metropolitan Council	Review of regulations, approval of the budget, oversight of the executive authorities, and introduction of amendments to development programmes.
Implementation	Seoul Metropolitan Government; 25 district offices (Gu Offices)	Implementation of infrastructure, transport, digital, social and environmental programmes through the sectoral departments of the municipal administration.
Monitoring and review	Mayor; Smart City Committee; Seoul Metropolitan Government	Annual preparation of the Implementation Plan, evaluation of policy implementation, review of the Master Plan and adjustment of development priorities.

Source: compiled by the author based on Seoul Metropolitan Government (n.d.b), Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781 (2020), Seoul Metropolitan Government (2021), M. Byun & J. Yoon (2023)

Seoul's institutional cycle was characterised by a high degree of procedural formalisation. Strategic decisions were not concentrated solely within the mayor's office, but underwent successive stages of analytical preparation, expert assessment, political approval and regulatory oversight. A distinctive feature of the model was the mandatory link between long-term development documents and annual implementation plans, which was enshrined in municipal legislation. This structure minimised the fragmentation of urban policy, ensured the stability of the strategic direction and created the conditions for the integration of digital technologies into all stages of policy-making, rather than merely into the provision of administrative services.

The international activities of megacities had gone beyond symbolic cooperation between municipalities. The practical value of international networks lay not only in the exchange of experience, but in the formation of alternative channels of global influence through which cities promoted their own political agendas. Singapore and Seoul demonstrated different strategies for such engagement: the former emphasised the export of governance models and institutional leadership through global forums, whilst the latter focused on coordinating international networks and replicating digital solutions. At the same time, both megacities used international engagement not as a supplement to domestic policy, but as a tool for enhancing their own agency in global governance. The map of the international political links of Singapore and Seoul was presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Map of the international political links of Singapore and Seoul

City	Area of international activity	Main instruments	Indicators of the city's international activity
Singapore	Global urban governance	World Cities Summit, World Cities Summit Mayors Forum, Centre for Liveable Cities	Since 2008, Singapore had regularly hosted the World Cities Summit. During this period, representatives from more than 250 cities worldwide had participated in the events. In 2022, the forum brought together more than 2,500 delegates from 56 countries and territories, including 72 mayors, ministers and city leaders.

Table 4. Continued

City	Area of international activity	Main instruments	Indicators of the city's international activity
Singapore	Digital diplomacy	Smart Nation, GovTech Singapore, AI Verify Foundation	Singapore became the first country to introduce the internationally oriented AI Verify testing framework. Through the Digital Government Exchange and GovTech, it cooperated with governments and digital agencies in dozens of countries on the implementation of digital public services.
	Regional integration	ASEAN Smart Cities Network	Singapore coordinated a number of joint projects under the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), which encompassed 26 pilot cities across ten ASEAN countries, using the network to scale Smart City and digital governance models.
	Export of governance practices	Centre for Liveable Cities, Singapore Cooperation Programme	The programmes of the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and the Singapore Cooperation Programme had been used to train public officials and urban managers from more than 170 countries and territories, making the city one of the leading centres for international policy transfer.
Seoul	Network diplomacy	WeGO, CityNet, Metropolis, UCLG	The WeGO Secretariat was based in Seoul. As of 2024, the organisation brought together 167 cities, institutions and corporate members, of which 142 were cities. This provided the city with a permanent coordinating role within the international digital governance network.
	Smart Governance	Seoul Smart City Prize, Smart Life Week	The Seoul Smart City Prize attracted dozens of municipalities from different countries each year. Smart Life Week had become an international platform for showcasing municipal AI solutions, digital mobility, open data and urban innovations, with the participation of governments, businesses and international organisations.
	Climate diplomacy	C40 Cities, Urban20	Through its participation in C40 and Urban20, Seoul contributed to the preparation of recommendations for G20 summits on urban climate policy, transport decarbonisation and achieving carbon neutrality, promoting municipal solutions at the global level.
	Inter-municipal cooperation	WeGO Academy, Seoul Digital Foundation, international partnerships	Through WeGO, Seoul coordinated training programmes, technical missions and digital projects for cities in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, using its own digital solutions as models for the international transfer of urban policy.

Source: compiled by the author based on Seoul Metropolitan Government (2019), K. Goode *et al.* (2023), T. Kamiński & N. Matiaszczyk (2023), World Cities Summit (2024), WeGO (2024; 2026), Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore (2025), Singapore Cooperation Programme (2025), GovTech Singapore (2026)

The map of international relations presented here illustrated various models for exercising political agency. Singapore utilised international networks as a tool for disseminating its own governance models and shaping global standards for urban development through the World Cities Summit and the Smart Nation initiative. Seoul emphasised institutional leadership within international organisations, serving as the headquarters of WeGO and as a member of the C40. A common feature of both megacities was the shift from traditional inter-municipal cooperation to ongoing participation in the formulation of international policy. Under these conditions, international city networks functioned as alternative centres of global governance, through which megacities advanced their own interests, formed transnational coalitions and influenced international decisions in the areas of climate, digitalisation and innovative development.

The political agency of megacities was not determined by formal constitutional status. It depended on their ability to integrate into the mechanisms of global governance. Unlike classical diplomacy, which was based on inter-state interaction, cities influenced the international political order by developing governance standards, participating in transnational networks, drafting joint political declarations and promoting their own models of governance. Singapore and Seoul were among the few Asian megacities that had developed their own models of international political leadership. However, the nature of this leadership differed. Singapore capitalised on the advantages of being a city-state by integrating urban governance, foreign policy and economic diplomacy into a single system. Seoul developed political agency through institutional networking, digital governance and international organisations, compensating for its lack of state sovereignty with high levels of engagement in transnational coalitions of cities. In the academic literature, this model was characterised as a transition from "policy transfer" to "policy leadership", whereby a city not only adopted governance decisions but also became an international exporter of them (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024). The political agency of Singapore and Seoul was compared in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparative assessment of the political agency of Singapore and Seoul according to key global governance criteria

Assessment criterion	Singapore	Seoul	Analytical conclusion
Source of international political legitimacy	State sovereignty, legal personality under international law, membership of the UN and ASEAN.	International recognition through the prestige of municipal governance, global networks of cities and digital leadership.	Singapore relied on classical state sovereignty, whilst Seoul relied on functional legitimacy derived from the effectiveness of urban policy.
Type of international political influence	Vertical – through state diplomacy, international law, and financial and security mechanisms.	Horizontal – through network diplomacy, Smart Governance standards and inter-municipal cooperation.	Two alternative models of political influence were emerging: the state-centred model and the network model.
Mechanism for building international authority	High institutional efficiency, macroeconomic stability, a global financial role, and predictable government policy.	Innovation in urban governance, digitalisation, open data, and the international dissemination of municipal practices.	The sources of international authority differ, but both models were based on the proven effectiveness of institutions.
Political stability of the international model	Virtually unaffected by changes in municipal leadership due to the integration of state and municipal institutions.	Partly depended on the mayor's priorities and government policy on local self-government.	The centralised model provided greater institutional stability, whilst the network-based model offered greater adaptability.
Geographical scope of international influence	A global financial centre with a concentration of links in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and North America.	A global network of municipal cooperation with a focus on countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa through international city organisations.	Singapore concentrated its influence around economic diplomacy, whilst Seoul focused on the transfer of urban policy.
Resources for political influence	The financial sector, international arbitration, a transport and logistics hub, and state diplomacy.	Digital technologies, Smart City initiatives, e-governance and international professional networks.	Political agency was shaped by different resources: economic and technological.
Policy transfer capacity	High. Models of integrated urban planning, the digital state, water management and public administration were exported.	High. Practices relating to Smart Cities, digital democracy, open data, AI solutions and municipal governance were becoming widespread.	Both cities had become global centres for the transfer of public policy, but in different sectors.
Scale of integration into global governance	A combination of participation in intergovernmental organisations and international city networks.	Predominant participation in specialised city networks and international professional platforms.	Singapore was integrated into two levels of global governance simultaneously, whilst Seoul was primarily integrated at the urban level.
Vulnerability of the model of political agency	High dependence on global economic conditions, international trade and geopolitical stability in the Asia-Pacific region.	Constitutional limits on municipal powers, dependence on national policy and budgetary mechanisms.	The constraints were of a different nature: foreign economic for Singapore and institutional and legal for Seoul.
Potential for other cities to scale up the model	Limited due to the city-state's unique status and the concentration of sovereign powers.	High, as most Smart Governance tools could be adapted by other megacities without changing the state system.	It was the Seoul model that had greater potential for international replication, whilst the Singapore model remained more of a unique institutional exception.

Source: compiled by the author based on S. Sassen (2001), T. Kamiński & N. Matiaszczyk (2023), Y.-M. Joo (2023), R. Martinez & T. Bunnell (2024), O. Woods *et al.* (2025), M.-G. Lee (2025)

A comparative analysis had shown that international political influence no longer correlated directly with a territory's formal legal status. Seoul, whilst lacking international legal personality, participated in global policy-making through international coalitions, where cities were able to collectively influence the agendas of the G20, COP and other international forums. C40 Cities defined Urban20 as an official mechanism for representing the position of metropolitan areas to the G20 countries. Urban recommendations were taken into account in the development of climate policies, financial adaptation mechanisms and decarbonisation programmes. This meant that a metropolis's political influence was shaped by its ability to integrate local solutions into global negotiation processes rather than through conventional diplomatic channels.

The factors behind the success of the Singapore and Seoul models shared a common institutional foundation, although they were implemented in different ways. The first factor lay in long-term strategic consistency. Both megacities implementeded policy through development documents designed to span decades, which minimised dependence on electoral cycles. The second factor related to the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus. Policy-making relied on think tanks, digital monitoring

systems and quantitative performance assessment, rather than solely on political decisions. The third factor was institutional openness to international exchange. Both cities went beyond merely participating in global forums; they established their own cooperation platforms through which governance practices were scaled up.

Another factor contributing to their success was the digitalisation of the policy-making process. In both cities, digital technologies were integrated not only into the sphere of administrative services but also into the system of strategic management. The OECD (2023) characterised Seoul's model as an example of the transition to data-driven governance, where the mayor's decisions were supported by an integrated analytical platform that aggregated information from hundreds of government systems in real time. This approach transformed the very mechanism of political governance: management decisions were based on forecasting, scenario modelling and the analysis of large datasets. Singapore was implementing a similar approach through its Smart Nation ecosystem (Smart Nation Singapore, 2025), integrating digital services, artificial intelligence and government information platforms into the strategic planning process. It was precisely this combination of institutional stability, technological maturity, international openness and the ability to export their own governance models that had secured both megacities the status of influential centres of global governance.

Despite the intensive development of urban diplomacy, the political autonomy of these megacities remained constrained by the institutional architecture of the international system. The main reason was the lack of international legal personality. None of the leading city networks – C40 Cities, UCLG, ICLEI, WeGO or U20 – had the right to conclude international treaties or participate in intergovernmental rule-making. They produced policy recommendations, expert opinions and joint declarations; however, the legal force of these documents depended on the decisions of national governments. This was precisely why cities' influence was exercised through "soft governance" mechanisms rather than through the traditional instruments of international law (Swiney, 2020). This model enhanced the political weight of megacities but did not replace state diplomacy. A second systemic constraint was vertical dependence on multi-level governance. Even megacities with a high degree of self-governance could not independently determine foreign policy, sanctions policy, defence cooperation or international financial obligations. The implementation of cities' climate policies was hampered by an inadequate division of powers between central and local authorities, as well as by municipalities' limited access to international funding. Even in countries with advanced decentralisation, the state remained the primary negotiator with international financial organisations and donors.

Financial autonomy also had clear limitations. The implementation of digital platforms, climate programmes, transport modernisation and Smart City projects required investment that exceeded the capacity of most municipal budgets. This meant that even technologically advanced megacities could not sustain digital transformation using their own resources alone. Digital sovereignty was another limiting factor. Most urban management systems operated on the basis of big data, artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure and digital identification. However, regulation in these areas was primarily carried out at national or supranational level (OECD, 2023). Cities faced challenges relating to the interoperability of digital platforms, the protection of personal data, cybersecurity, inter-agency information sharing, and the alignment of local digital policies with national legislation. Thus, even advanced models of Smart Governance could not function in isolation from national digital policy.

The political influence of cities also depended on their position within global networks. Real access to international policy-making was predominantly held by megacities with a high concentration of financial capital, an innovative economy, research centres and international organisations. Smaller cities, even as members of C40 or UCLG, did not set the agenda for these organisations. As a result, a new hierarchy of urban diplomacy was emerging, where political influence was concentrated around a limited circle of global centres. The geopolitical fragmentation of the international system posed a particular challenge. After 2022, issues of technological security, strategic supply chains, control of critical infrastructure and artificial intelligence became the subject of inter-state competition. Under such conditions, the scope for cities to engage in independent international activity was narrowing, as some strategic decisions were being integrated into national security strategies. This was particularly evident in the digital sphere, where municipal initiatives were coordinated with national cybersecurity and data regulation policies (Fernández de Losada, 2022).

Despite these constraints, trends indicated a further strengthening of the role of megacities in global governance. It was cities that were becoming the main arena for the implementation of international climate policy, whilst multilevel governance was identified as a necessary condition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This signified a shift in focus from intergovernmental coordination to joint policy-making across different levels of government. Climate diplomacy by cities was developing most dynamically. At COP29, the MAP Declaration – Multisectoral Actions Pathways for Resilient and Healthy Cities (COP29 Declaration…, 2024) – was adopted and signed by over 150 stakeholders, including 52 national governments. This document integrated urban health into the climate agenda for the first time and covered issues such as disaster resilience, urban afforestation, green skills and climate finance. Immediately afterwards, the Baku Continuity Coalition was established, bringing together the four COP presidencies (Egypt – COP27, UAE – COP28, Azerbaijan – COP29, Brazil – COP30) together with UN-Habitat to ensure continuity of the urban climate agenda between summits (UN-Habitat, 2024a). Cities were developing common standards for decarbonisation, climate change adaptation,

green infrastructure funding and urban resilience, which served as a benchmark during international negotiations.

The next stage was expected to be digital diplomacy. The growing role of artificial intelligence, digital twins of cities, open data and platforms supporting management decisions was transforming the nature of international cooperation. Competition between megacities was shifting from infrastructure to digital governance standards, as evidenced by the creation of the European consortium CitiVerse EDIC (European Digital Infrastructure Consortium), which 14 EU Member States had already joined to jointly develop technologies for local digital twins (European Commission, 2024). Knowledge diplomacy was also expected to expand. Megacities were exporting not individual technological solutions, but ready-made governance models. Centres of excellence, international academies of urban governance, professional training programmes for municipal officials and joint research platforms were becoming instruments for shaping global governance standards. Since 2008, the Seoul Human Resources Development Centre had been running international training programmes for civil servants from foreign cities, and in 2024 it organised a series of online and face-to-face training sessions for officials from various regions of the world in collaboration with ICLEI, Metropolis and other international networks (ICLEI East Asia, 2024). This format of cooperation ensured a longer-lasting political impact than traditional city-to-city partnership agreements.

The analysis carried out had shown that a megacity ceased to be merely an administrative and territorial unit and acted as an independent political intermediary between the local, national and global levels of governance. Despite the persistence of constitutional and international legal constraints, the political influence of megacities was growing thanks to their ability to generate governance innovations, shape international standards in the fields of digital governance, climate policy and sustainable development, and coordinate the activities of transnational urban coalitions. It was precisely these factors that were shaping the new architecture of global urban diplomacy, in which megacities were gradually becoming influential actors in international politics, not replacing the state but expanding the possibilities of multi-level global governance.

DISCUSSION

This study has shown that the political agency of megacities is shaped not only by their economic concentration or the scale of urbanisation, but primarily by their ability to integrate their own institutional mechanisms into a multi-level system of global governance. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of M. Acuto *et al.* (2024), who demonstrated the decisive role of international city networks in the development of climate diplomacy. At the same time, this study has expanded upon this approach. Whilst the aforementioned authors focused primarily on the functioning of horizontal mechanisms of interaction between cities, the analysis has revealed the existence of various models combining horizontal and vertical diplomatic channels. Singapore utilised an intergovernmental format for international cooperation, drawing on its sovereign status and traditional diplomatic instruments, whilst Seoul exerted political influence through the network architecture of WeGO and C40. It is precisely this differentiation that demonstrated that horizontal diplomacy does not serve as a universal model for the development of all global cities.

A similar pattern of comparison was also observed during the analysis of the work by D.M. Liando *et al.* (2026). The authors established that the effectiveness of the Smart City 2.0 concept is determined not by technological solutions as such, but by the quality of the institutional organisation of governance. The study confirmed this pattern using the examples of Singapore and Seoul. The analysis demonstrated that digitalisation is not a self-sufficient factor in political leadership. Mechanisms of inter-agency coordination, strategic planning and institutional policy continuity were found to be of paramount importance. In Singapore, this role is fulfilled by the Strategy Group at the Prime Minister's Office, the Long-Term Plan and the Master Plan, whilst in Seoul a multi-level system of expert assessment, approval and political implementation of decisions is in place. Whilst D.M. Liando *et al.* emphasised the digital transformation of governance, the analysis has shown that digital tools have emerged as a derivative of stable institutional models. This finding correlates with the conclusions of the aforementioned authors, although it shifts the emphasis from technological innovation to the political architecture of governance.

Comparison with the findings of S. Baek (2026) revealed another level of interrelationship. The author proposed the concept of topological urban identity, linking long-term planning with the formation of a new spatial image of Seoul. This study confirmed the importance of strategic planning, but examined it through the lens of the city's political agency in the international environment. It was established that long-term development documents perform not only an urban planning function but also create institutional predictability for the metropolis's external activities. The Master Plan and other policy documents ensured the continuity of the political course regardless of changes in political leadership. Unlike the author, who focused on the transformation of urban identity, the analysis demonstrated the political dimension of strategic planning as an instrument of international competitiveness.

The findings of H.-Y. Cha (2025) were also corroborated by this study. The author established that Seoul's participation in international urban networks is selective in nature and depends on the alignment of platforms with the city's strategic interests. The analysis revealed a similar pattern, although it interpreted it more broadly. It was found that institutional constraints on international legal personality did not diminish Seoul's political activity, but rather stimulated the concentration of resources in those networks where the city could achieve the maximum political impact. Coordination of activities through WeGO has

formed a long-term instrument of international influence, whilst participation in global climate networks has provided additional legitimacy to the city's diplomacy. This finding correlates with H.-Y. Cha's conclusions regarding the selectivity of international engagement, although this study linked such selectivity to compensating for the lack of international legal personality.

The work of H.-C. Lee (2025) provided another dimension for comparison. The author proposed the concept of city-driven regionalism as an alternative to state-centric models of regional integration. This study confirmed the strengthening of the role of cities in the global political sphere, but found that this transformation occurs differently depending on the institutional status of the metropolis. Singapore integrated the functions of the state and the city, eliminating conflicts of competence between the national and municipal levels. Seoul followed a different model, combining administrative autonomy with strategic coordination by the central government. This distinction made it possible to demonstrate the existence of two alternative trajectories for the development of cities' political agency. A comparison with the findings of C. Wong *et al.* (2022) revealed a high degree of conceptual consistency. The authors demonstrated that the success of city-states is determined by their ability to act as hubs for global flows of capital, knowledge and technology. This study confirmed this pattern using the example of Singapore, whilst also highlighting its political dimension. It was found that the intermediary function extends not only to economic processes but also to the development of international governance standards, the professional training of officials and the institutional export of public governance models. The Singapore Cooperation Programme and the Centre for Liveable Cities have facilitated the transfer of governance practices to over 170 countries, extending beyond the sphere of economic intermediation.

Comparison with the conclusions of Y. Boquet (2024) revealed a different logic of interrelationship. The author demonstrated the advantages of the Singaporean model of sustainable urbanisation compared with Manila, attributing them to the quality of public administration and long-term planning. The study confirmed the crucial importance of strategic planning, but shifted the focus from environmental policy to the megacity's international political activities. The analysis showed that sustainable development ensures not only environmental efficiency but also the institutional stability of diplomatic strategies, international positioning and long-term political forecasting. The consistency of its political course has enabled Singapore to maintain a stable presence in global governance regardless of changes in external conditions. The final section of the comparison concerned the work by R. Xiao *et al.* (2024), which focused on the spatial evolution of East Asian megacities. The authors found that Seoul had transitioned to a compact polycentric development model following the completion of a phase of intensive territorial expansion. Whilst the study did not analyse the city's spatial morphology as a separate subject, the results confirmed the institutional consequences of such a transformation. The compactness of the administrative structure, the procedural formalisation of the political cycle and the concentration of administrative functions created favourable conditions for the rapid implementation of Smart Governance models and the international dissemination of digital governance practices. The city's spatial maturity was coupled with the maturity of its political institutions. A synthesis of the comparative findings demonstrated that the study not only confirmed most of the tenets of global city theory but also expanded its explanatory power by comparing two fundamentally different models of international political integration among megacities. The findings demonstrated that the effectiveness of global political activity is not determined by individual digital technologies, economic resources or the scale of international contacts. Of decisive importance are the institutional governance architecture, long-term strategic consistency, the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus and the ability to integrate local decision-making mechanisms into the system of global governance. It is precisely this pattern that explains why two different models of political organisation – Singapore's sovereign model and Seoul's network model – achieve comparable levels of international influence, whilst utilising different institutional instruments to achieve global political agency.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has demonstrated the transformation of global megacities into independent political actors within the international system. A theoretical analysis of five conceptual approaches – Global City, City Diplomacy, Paradiplomacy, Multi-level Governance and Network Governance – has revealed how they complement one another in explaining the various levels of cities' political agency. The synergy of these mechanisms lays the foundation for the political autonomy of cities in a globalised environment. An empirical comparison of Singapore and Seoul confirmed the existence of two alternative models of integration into global governance. Singapore utilises the advantages of state sovereignty and legal personality under international law, acting through vertical diplomatic channels. The institutional model of this city-state integrates the national and municipal levels of governance into a single system, where the Strategy Group at the Prime Minister's Office ensures cross-sectoral policy coordination. The dominance of strategic planning through the Long-Term Plan and the Master Plan ensures the stability of the political course for decades. The political cycle in Singapore is integrated in nature, with the Prime Minister's Office acting as the coordination hub, combining strategic forecasting with oversight of policy implementation. Seoul, whilst lacking international legal personality, compensates for this through institutional leadership within the international networks WeGO and C40 and by exporting Smart Governance models. Seoul's institutional cycle is formalised procedurally: strategic decisions undergo analytical preparation, expert assessment, political approval and regulatory oversight.

Through the World Cities Summit, Singapore has attracted representatives from over 250 cities; in 2022, the forum brought together more than 2,500 delegates from 56 countries, including 72 mayors, ministers and city leaders, whilst the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Singapore Cooperation Programme have trained administrators from over 170 countries and territories. Seoul, as the host of the WeGO secretariat, coordinated 167 cities, institutions and corporate members as of 2024, of which 142 were cities. Singapore is integrated into intergovernmental organisations and city networks, whilst Seoul operates primarily at the city level. Singapore's vulnerability lies in its dependence on global economic conditions, whilst Seoul's lies in the constitutional limits on its powers and its dependence on government policy. The potential for scaling up the Seoul model is greater, as Smart Governance tools can be adapted by other megacities without changing the state structure, whilst the Singapore model remains a unique institutional exception. Common factors contributing to success have been identified as long-term strategic consistency, the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus, institutional openness and the digitalisation of the policy-making process. Risks relate to institutional and legal constraints on the political agency of both megacities. The limitations of the study stem from the use of qualitative comparative analysis of two case studies, which makes it difficult to statistically generalise the results to the entire population of global megacities. A promising direction for further research is the quantitative verification of the identified institutional patterns using an expanded sample of cities with different political systems and levels of economic development.

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