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Douglas C. Nord. *Sister City Diplomacy: Community Engagement in US-Russian Relations from the Cold War to Today*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2025. 214 pp. ISBN 9780299352905 (cloth), ISBN 9780299352936 (PDF).

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In 1963 the legendary broadcast reporter and American statesman Edward R. Murrow said, “The real crucial link in international exchange is the last three feet, which is bridged by personal contact, one person talking to another.” In his book, Douglas C. Nord invites readers to focus on these “three feet” of international relations—what we now broadly call people-to-people diplomacy. Today the world once again finds itself searching for ways out of international political entanglements and diplomatic gridlock, seeking to ease tensions and reestablish meaningful dialogue. When discussing the current state of US-Russian relations, political analysts often invoke the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 as a kind of “tuning fork” against which to gauge the tone of communication between the two major world powers, as well as the level of tension in the complex instrument known as “track 1 diplomacy”—official governmental international dialogue conducted by professional diplomats. As the current state of world politics makes us once again turn to the infamous “tuning fork” to analyze the level of international tensions, Nord’s book provides examples of how people-to-people diplomacy could be used for “keeping the peace when it matters too much to be left to politicians,” as Don Carlson and Craig Comstock (1986) put it in the subtitle of their study of “citizen summitry.”

Nord’s book is not merely another scholarly examination of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras but a practical and compelling guide that offers a roadmap toward easing international tensions and rebuilding international relations—one handshake at a time. Nord views the key events of the second half of the twentieth century and US international politics through the lens of people-to-people diplomacy. The author draws attention to the 1950s and explains how non-state-actor diplomacy emerged and gradually developed into various forms: public (the federal government’s soft power endeavors), civic (municipal government’s efforts to establish and maintain cross-border connections), grassroots (sports and arts diplomacy), and citizen (informal, individual initiatives and support). Nord compiles these forms of diplomacy into a table and further categorizes them as either “government” or “community” (p. 34). Thus, the author suggests examining eight different forms of diplomacy. However, throughout the book, there are other terms that Nord uses: “people-to-people” diplomacy, “community” diplomacy versus “community-based” diplomacy, diplomacy “at a local level” versus “local” diplomacy, and “sister-city” diplomacy. At times, these terms appear to be used interchangeably in the book. This makes it difficult for readers to determine which form of people-to-people diplomacy the author is referring to, especially when one of these terms is used without an ac-

companying example. In fact, cross-border interactions in which non-state actors play the primary roles have diverse and overlapping formats, leading to rather chaotic labeling of these formats in literature (compare, for example, the “nine tracks” of the “multitrack diplomacy” classification system developed by Diamond and McDonald [1996]).

In addition to the terminological inconsistencies, the book contains a few other minor discrepancies. For instance, Nord mistranslates the toponym Petrovskaya Sloboda, meaning “Peter’s Settlement,” as “Peter’s Works.” This translation corresponds to the later name of the city of Petrozavodsk, which grew out of Petrovskaya Sloboda (p. 57). Another source for confusion is the fact that throughout the book Nord is sparing with dates, which makes it challenging for readers to place events within a specific year or decade, requiring them to flip back through earlier pages for context. This is partially due to Nord’s “back-and-forth” narrative format. The author alternates between zooming in on highly local details of the lives of real people living in two cities—Petrozavodsk and Duluth, which are separated by thousands of miles—and zooming out to present the broader picture of two superpowers oscillating between periods of tension, détente, and recurring diplomatic gridlock. This nonlinear format makes the book engaging to read but requires additional effort to keep up with the terminology and the timing of particular events.

Nord’s book will be of interest to a wide range of readers—from scholars working in international studies to local practitioners and enthusiasts seeking to strengthen existing international connections or to establish new ones. It deserves a place on the desk of a government expert in people-to-people diplomacy, in university libraries, and as a reference guide for members of Global Ties US, a national organization that promotes people-to-people diplomacy. Translating the book into Russian would allow the work to reach audiences in Russia as well. Although the book is an academic study, it offers a wealth of concrete examples and distinctive details that make it both informative and engaging to read. It has the potential to inspire a renewed wave of enthusiasm for community diplomacy, encouraging readers to bridge those difficult yet crucial last “three feet” and move toward one another.

Nord uses a 10-chapter structure to unpack five central themes: (1) the changing character of US-USSR relations, (2) the nature and character of people-to-people diplomacy, (3) the role of international education and outreach in people-to-people diplomatic initiatives in Petrozavodsk, Karelia, and Duluth, Minnesota, (4) pitfalls and challenges that must be considered when initiating and sustaining international connections at the local level, and (5) concrete and often impressive outcomes of people-to-people diplomacy in Duluth. Nord explores these themes in a nonlinear way: introducing and revisiting certain concepts and ideas and supporting them with specific examples. In the concluding section, Nord circles back to the first theme, addressing the current state of US-Russia relations. Now equipped with a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, significance, and potential effectiveness of people-to-people diplomacy, readers are invited to reconsider contemporary world affairs and US-Russia interactions in particular.

In chapter 1, Nord outlines the structure of the book. He emphasizes the importance of fostering diplomacy at the local level (p. 5) and links the 1980s trend toward the “democratization of international affairs” (p. 6) to the origins of the Duluth-Petrozavodsk sister-city relationship. Nord combines historical analysis, personal experience, and theoretical insights into the role of non-state actors in international relations in his discussion of the book’s core themes. In chapter 2, he explores the historical development of “community-based” diplomacy, tracing its roots to peace movements and cultural exchanges. He examines how individuals and local groups have historically contributed to international relations, often operating outside the formal structures of state diplomacy. The author compiles a table that distinguishes between various forms of diplomacy (p. 34). The table could be used as an effective analytical tool; however, as discussed earlier, it omits several terms that are consistently used in the book. This classification also leaves little room for “hybrid” diplomatic programs such as the more than 80-year-old International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). The IVLP operates under the framework of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (the Fulbright–Hays Act) and exemplifies public-private cooperation. It brings together government, nongovernment, and private actors to build relationships between US citizens and visitors from abroad. As a long-standing and highly respected initiative, the IVLP merits at least a brief mention, if not a deeper analysis, as a case that bridges all eight forms of diplomacy listed in the table.

In chapter 3, Nord situates the Duluth-Petrozavodsk story within the broader global context of US-Soviet relations during the Cold War, focusing on alternating periods of confrontation and *détente*. His discussion of how the ideological and political rivalry between the two superpowers created a challenging environment for people-to-people diplomacy is particularly engaging, especially for readers who lived through parts of this era, either remembering Cold War events personally or encountering them through family and educational narratives. Among the pivotal moments that Nord highlights are the late 1950s thaw that led to cultural exchange agreements and the 1973 summit, which helped open the door to people-to-people diplomacy (p. 40). The chapter underscores the importance of these high-level diplomatic developments in creating space for local communities to engage across political divides. Nord also examines how Cold War attitudes shaped public perception of both the Soviet Union and the United States, influencing the possibilities for collaboration between Duluth and Petrozavodsk.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the author does not address the very first US-USSR sister-city partnership. Initial mayoral-level contacts were established in Seattle, Washington, in 1971, and the official joint communiqué of the Sister City Association was signed in June 1973 in Tashkent, then part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Peterson 2023:3, 77). This agreement marked the first instance of a Soviet city formally becoming a sister city of an American counterpart. Although one might argue that a partnership involving a Soviet city outside the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic falls beyond the scope of Nord’s focus on US-Russian relations, such an omission is nevertheless notable. In the first half of the book, Nord consistently refers to Soviet cities, and chapter 3 itself is explicitly framed around US-Sovi-

et relations. The Seattle-Tashkent sistership emerged and developed actively for more than a decade before formal relations between Duluth and Petrozavodsk were established. From a scholarly perspective, acknowledging the Seattle-Tashkent precedent—even briefly—would have strengthened the historical completeness of the narrative.

Through his examination of the global historical context, Nord effectively sets the stage for a more focused analysis of the historical, social, and economic contexts of Duluth and Petrozavodsk in chapters 4 through 7. The author highlights shared characteristics of the two cities, including their identities as lakeside communities shaped by immigration and borderland histories. Particularly compelling is his discussion of Finnish immigrant connections, which played a significant role in laying the groundwork for the partnership. Nord traces each city's development from its Indigenous roots to its emergence as an industrial and transportation hub. He also examines the challenges, such as economic decline and social dislocation, that motivated local leaders to seek international engagement. Nord convincingly argues that these local factors shaped both the character and trajectory of the Duluth-Petrozavodsk relationship. He recounts early efforts to establish the sister-city partnership, driven by local leaders, academics, and community activists. The episode of "hockey diplomacy," which served as an initial bridge between the two communities (p. 116), adds an interesting and unexpected twist and a new dimension to the narrative. Nord also highlights the contributions of key figures such as Brooks Anderson, leader of the Petrozavodsk Sister City Project, who championed the idea of the partnership by advocating for bottom-up citizen diplomacy, and Joyce Benson, the first chair of the Sister-City Commission, who supported a civic diplomacy model and played a central role in formalizing the sistership. At the same time, he does not shy away from discussing the early challenges, including the tensions between proponents of civic diplomacy—more formalized efforts led by the municipal government—and the advocates of more grassroots, citizen-led approaches fueled by individuals' enthusiasm and private financial support.

Nord's analysis of the formalization of sister-city relationships and the roles of municipal officials, academic institutions, and community organizations invites readers to think more broadly about people-to-people diplomacy in other regions and historical contexts. In this regard, the book might have benefited from more detailed references to such examples as, for instance, the sister-city relationships between Portland, Maine, and Arkhangelsk, USSR, or Gainesville, Florida, and Novorossiisk, USSR (established, respectively, in 1983 and 1982). In light of more recent trends, including generational change, declining participation, and fatigue within sister-city programs, Nord emphasizes the need for adaptability, intergenerational engagement, and innovation in people-to-people diplomacy. Thus, in addition to a briefly summarized story of Samantha Smith, an American schoolgirl and young peace activist who became famous for writing a letter to the then-Soviet leader Yuri Andropov (p. 71), the individual unconventional initiatives—such as jazz diplomacy, art diplomacy, and medical diplomacy (Warner and Shuman 1987)—could likewise have provided additional comparative context and stimulated readers' creative thinking.

In chapter 8, Nord turns to the evolution of US-Russian relations since 2000, examining how the rise of Vladimir Putin to power in Russia and growing bilateral tensions affected the Duluth-Petrozavodsk relationship. From Barack Obama administration's "reset" policy to Donald Trump's transactional approach and Joe Biden's cautious engagement, Nord illustrates how shifting geopolitical dynamics have constrained opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy, particularly in the context of the current war in Ukraine. Chapter 9 further underscores the importance of inclusivity, adaptability, and sustained institutional support in addressing the challenges facing contemporary US-Russia sister-city relationships. Nord, in chapter 10, concludes by reflecting on the lessons learned from the Duluth-Petrozavodsk partnership and offers practical recommendations for communities seeking to establish or sustain international outreach initiatives. Emphasizing the need for a clear vision, robust organizational structures, and adequate resources, the book ends on a cautiously hopeful note about the enduring value of people-to-people diplomacy in fostering global mutual understanding and peace.

The text offers concrete examples and distinctive details that can enhance historical analysis and inform future approaches to people-to-people diplomacy. For example, on page 166, Nord revisits the importance of creative thinking and engaging younger generations in sister-city activities. He describes a recent film project, which brought together Indigenous youth from the Fond du Lac community in Duluth and their counterparts in Petrozavodsk. The project resulted in a film *Birchbark* (2024), which highlighted commonalities between the Ojibwe people in the US and the Indigenous Karelian people in Russia, centering on the life of a birch tree as a cultural and environmental symbol. This initiative demonstrates how local diplomacy can benefit from creative approaches, allowing participants to share perspectives, tell stories, and connect across borders. This project advances the idea of "allowing works from different Indigenous cultures to speak to one another" (Pearson and Knabe 2015:25–26) by establishing a space where not only their works, but also the authors themselves—representatives of different Indigenous cultures—could speak to one another and create works together. Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and political tensions, participants utilized digital technology—including email, videoconferencing, and video-editing tools—to ensure the continuity of the sister-city program. The project effectively addressed Nord's concern about generational change and declining enthusiasm for sister-city relations (p. 17), engaging and empowering younger participants in meaningful ways. Nord's example is an excellent reference point for scholars studying this evolving approach to international interactions between people—"video diplomacy"—which engages younger generations who are fluent in digital and social media tools.

I would like to conclude with a short story. A young colleague of mine who graduated from Petrozavodsk State University and now lives in the US, working in public diplomacy, was an active participant in the Duluth-Petrozavodsk international academic exchange. She and her husband, also a former participant in the University of Minnesota Duluth international exchange program, learned that a book on Duluth-Petrozavodsk sister-city relations had recently been published. They became ex-

tremely enthusiastic. Both of them were eager to read it as soon as possible, but several months passed, and neither found the time. It is a fact of life that millennials and subsequent generations prefer digital platforms to books. Perhaps, if Nord's book were adapted or animated for platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or other media favored by younger audiences, it could capture their attention and entice them to engage with its content. Similarly, shifting some grassroots initiatives for international people-to-people relations to social media might attract the "new blood" that Nord hopes to inspire (pp. 166, 180). Building on Zhenglun Chen and Ping Tang's (2026) idea of conceptualizing online citizen diplomacy as an ethically anchored diplomatic practice, it is now time to consider social media citizen diplomacy—*social mediaplomacy*—as one of the modern ways to bridge the "last three feet" that Edward R. Murrow once described but could probably never have imagined becoming a virtual three feet.

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