



# The Influence of Strategic Subnational Diplomacy in International Relations

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## ► Key Takeaways

- The international engagement of cities and local governments has increased and diversified recently. Mainly understood by the general public as the cultural and academic ties cultivated within the sister-city framework, these connections now bear deeper and more strategic implications.
- Cities and local governments are operating across borders as they must manage the acute effects of global challenges, such as geopolitical competition, climate change, pandemics, and migration. Local leaders must strategically update their toolbox to manage international affairs, advance their communities' economic and social progress, and elevate their interests in the multilateral system.
- This new strategic dimension of subnational diplomacy has implications for national governments. Some ignore this phenomenon, attempt to limit it, or seek to exploit subnational relationships to advance their national interests. Others recognize the need to support subnational diplomacy as a value add in foreign policy statecraft, such as the United States.

## Introduction

Behind the scenes of the 2024 Olympic Games, intense city-to-city exchanges connected the cities of Paris and Los Angeles on the transformational challenges required to align the games with the Paris Agreement goals. In the United States (US), justice and national security actors uncovered illicit influence campaigns on behalf of the People's Republic of China within the state government of New York.<sup>1</sup> In the lead-up to the 2024 United Nations (UN) Summit of the Future, cities and local governments assert their role as partners to the UN and national governments in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

These three examples in 2024 illustrate the intersection of local action and world affairs. Subnational leaders are on the frontline of addressing global challenges such as global health, migration, and the impact of climate change, including water scarcity and urban heat. New geopolitical contests also expose local leaders and communities to disinformation, foreign interference, and attacks against local democracy.

The understanding of the growing international engagement of local actors has not reached a consensus.<sup>2</sup> Several definitions capture different facets and perspectives. Public diplomacy includes cities and local governments as a level of action and influence for

nation-states to foster people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. The concept of paradiplomacy gives more agency to nonstate actors in international relations “as a political mobilization” to advance their interests in response to new transnational challenges.<sup>3</sup> City diplomacy – or subnational diplomacy, when including middle levels of government such as counties, regions, provinces, or US states – recognizes a diplomatic function to local governments, not only among themselves but also toward international organizations and other national governments.

Regardless of the diversity of definitions, cities and local governments leverage international connections to access investment, share ideas, and shape solutions to their local challenges. At the level where the rubber meets the road, their participation in multilevel coordination is increasingly helpful in solving global challenges. The higher level of trust of local leaders compared to national institutions in the US<sup>4</sup> as in Europe also gives them more confidence as effective innovators on tough policy trade-offs.

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### The concept of paradiplomacy gives more agency to nonstate actors in international relations

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1. United States Attorney's Office, “Former High-Ranking New York State Government Employee Charged with Acting as an Undisclosed Agent of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party”, September 3, 2024, available at: [www.justice.gov](http://www.justice.gov).

2. Y. Viltard, “Conceptualiser la ‘diplomatie des villes’”, *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 58, 2008, pp. 511-533.

3. N. Oddone, “Paradiplomacy”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 2023, available at: [www.oxfordre.com](http://www.oxfordre.com).

4. J. Copeland, “Americans Rate Their Federal, State and Local Governments Less Positively Than a Few Years Ago”, *Short Reads*, April 11, 2023, available at: [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

This trend leads to new debates about the implications of subnational diplomacy for national governments: how should national governments manage the opportunities and risks associated with their cities' and local governments' international engagement? This briefing explores the rapidly changing nature of subnational diplomacy, its growing strategic importance, and the US case as an illustration of a national government's response.

## Subnational diplomacy in a new strategic landscape

Subnational diplomacy is accelerating and emerging as a new source of global cooperation and leadership. While cities have been engaging across borders for centuries, today's landscape features a "proliferation of city diplomacy efforts."<sup>5</sup>

This proliferation is driven by a change in the strategic environment in which local governments operate. Foreign policy and national security issues are now at the doorstep of local governments. From what is traditionally accepted as legitimate initiatives of local governments to advance economic or cultural goals, subnational diplomacy is moving towards more strategic engagement on issues linked to geopolitical competition, national security, and reforms in the multilateral system.

### ***Great power competition at the local level***

Accounting for more than 80% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), cities are core centers of the global economy, concentrating not only on economic activity but also on driving economic growth.<sup>6</sup> Urban centers are strategic nodes in an interconnected system of infrastructures channeling flows of capital, goods, people, and ideas between countries.

In the new international order, sometimes called "minilateralism," characterized by small, ad-hoc coalitions of countries organized around specific goals, local governments can play bigger roles as partners bringing technical know-how.<sup>7</sup> As major power competition returns, cities also become spaces of new global geoeconomic contests between major players for infrastructure investments and access to resources.<sup>8</sup>

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5. For a historic review of city diplomacy, see M. Acuto, A. Kosovac and K. Hartley, "City Diplomacy: Another Generational Shift?", *Diplomatica*, Vol. 3, 2021, pp. 137-146.

6. "Urban Development", World Bank, available at: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org).

7. J. B. Alterman and L. McElwee, "Pursuing Global Order in the Twenty-first Century", CSIS, April 22, 2024, available at: [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org).

8. B. Jones, J. Feltman and W. Moreland, "Competitive Multilateralism: Adapting Institutions to Meet the New Geopolitical Environment", Brookings, 2019, available at: [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

The value of urban centers in great power competition is exemplified in the “new corridor competition” involving the US, the European Union (EU), China, and India.<sup>9</sup> The infrastructure of gateway cities, such as ports and their logistics networks, are key assets that need to be controlled and developed. The acquisition of European port terminals by China in full, such as the Piree in Greece, or partially, such as in Hamburg, Germany, and the subsequent backlash, illustrate the strategic importance for national governments of cities’ infrastructures. The G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) and the Trans-African Corridor developed as a counter to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), put cities and urban centers at the center of the reshaping of the international order, with projects in consultation with and in support of subnational entities.<sup>10</sup>

### ***City and local leaders face national security issues***

In a context of great power competition, local leaders must be equipped to conduct due diligence and navigate potential national security implications. US intelligence actors have lately signaled the risks related to the cooptation of subnational diplomacy by certain national governments, especially China, to advance their influence and interests.<sup>11</sup>

Lower levels of experience and awareness, especially among smaller cities, can be

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**China “uses subnational relationships to influence its national political and economic interests in partner countries”**

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exploited to circumvent the due diligence mechanisms of national agencies. China’s growing interest in subnational influence in Europe has led to increased scrutiny, as illustrated by a US State Department project to assess China’s subnational engagement in Europe.<sup>12</sup> The US State Department regularly emphasizes how China “uses subnational relationships to influence its national political and economic interests in partner countries.”<sup>13</sup> This exploitation exposes local governments to “growing

economic dependency, industrial espionage and technology transfer, and increasing political pressure and disinformation.” Cities engaging with Taiwan for cultural or commercial goals, or taking critical stances towards China’s human rights record

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9. I. Klaus and S. Curtis, “The New Corridor Competition Between Washington and Beijing: How Groundbreaking Infrastructure Projects Will Shape Cities and Geopolitics”, April 12, 2024, available at: [www.carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org).

10. “Memorandum on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment”, The White House, June 26, 2022, available at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

11. “Non-state Actors Playing Greater Roles in Governance and International Affairs”, National Intelligence Council, July 5, 2023, available at: [www.dni.gov](http://www.dni.gov).

12. “Next Steps to Defend the Transatlantic Alliance from Chinese Aggression”, The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 2024, available at: [www.foreign.senate.gov](http://www.foreign.senate.gov).

13. P. Costello and I. Trijsburg, “Combating Disinformation in Cities”, March 7, 2024, available at: [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org).

regarding Tibetans, Uyghurs, or pro-democracy activists have found themselves exposed to interference and pressures from China, like San Francisco.<sup>14</sup>

Cities are also the target of concerted disinformation campaigns that impact the ability of local leaders to manage their city.<sup>15</sup> As city or diaspora leaders take stances and initiatives of solidarity in the context of ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, they can become targets for malign actors.

### ***Filling a gap in the multilateral system***

Inefficiencies in the multilateral system also drive the growth of strategic subnational diplomacy efforts. The renewed unilateralism of major powers combined with the inability of nation-states to cooperate or meet their ambitions at the negotiating table has led to gridlocks in multilateral organizations on key global challenges, such as preventing conflicts, addressing climate change, and managing migration.

Local governments are left to deal with the limits of collective coordination and resources matching their urgent local needs. These inefficiencies deepen a “power imbalance”<sup>16</sup> between the intense shocks they face and the resources available to manage them effectively. This imbalance can be described as a “disconnect between top-down national policies and the bottom-up, context-specific solutions required by cities”<sup>17</sup> to solve global challenges that have disproportionate effects on urban areas and municipalities, such as heat and migration crises.

Calls for reforming the multilateral system often point out that the world of Bretton Woods, which founded modern multilateralism, differs greatly from today: urbanization grew from 30% in 1945 to 56% today. Thus, reinvigorating existing multilateral institutions to meet current conditions entails increasing cities’ and local governments’ voices in shaping global solutions.

## **Strategic subnational diplomacy in practice**

In response to this rapidly changing political and diplomatic environment, many cities, not only large and globally connected ones, embrace “strategic subnational diplomacy” to advance their interests, promote their agendas and ambitions, and form partnerships with their counterparts worldwide.

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14. A. F. Pipa and M. Bouchet, “Multilateralism Restored? City Diplomacy in the COVID-19 Era”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2020, pp. 599-610.

15. “How China Extended Its Repression into an American City”, *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2024, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

16. “Our Collective Call: A New Agenda for Urban Resilience Action”, Resilient Cities Network, June 26, 2024, available at: [www.resilientcitiesnetwork.org](http://www.resilientcitiesnetwork.org).

17. B. R. Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2013.

Local governments are constrained by national law and the devolution of power from constitutional arrangements that, for instance, prevent them from signing treaties. However, observers will find a surprisingly wide latitude of subnational diplomacy initiatives. In his seminal book, *If Mayors Ruled the World*, Benjamin Barber noted that cities benefit from their lack of sovereignty by turning their powerlessness in international law into an opportunity. While traditional diplomacy follows the slow movement of institutions and is bound by long-term alliances, commitments, and treaties, cities can recalibrate their relations quickly based on changing needs and priorities.

### ***Cities cultivate a wide range of international and bilateral relationships***

In the early post-WWII era, sister-city relations were a powerful tool for peace, paving the way for robust cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Beyond these cultural ties, city governments have enhanced their bilateral relations to tackle specific problems, leveraging issue-specific and time-bound agreements based on shared assets and goals.

Technical agreements and memorandums of understanding on issues related to climate cooperation, infrastructure, or sustainable development have rapidly grown and are oftentimes more effective tools for tangible outcomes than sister-city relations. For instance, cities like Los Angeles and Long Beach have used “ports diplomacy” to develop connections with counterparts in Asia to establish new shipping routes and cooperation

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### **Subnational diplomacy can effectively fit into regional cooperation frameworks driven by national and supraregional governments**

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of green shipping, including with Long An, Vietnam, and Yokkaichi, Japan. Marseille and Algiers, two gateway and port cities across the Mediterranean Sea, have signed a recent agreement to foster cooperation and exchanges on urban and maritime innovation, conservancy, and other goals.

Subnational diplomacy can effectively fit into regional cooperation frameworks driven by national and supraregional governments, such as the Union for the Mediterranean and the International Urban and Regional Cooperation initiative that connects cities in the European Union and North America on sustainable development. In neighborhood policy, locally-driven cooperation adds a layer to regional cooperation, such as the Cities Forward Initiative between US and Latin American cities on climate action.

### ***Global networking to share best practices and technical expertise***

The rise of city networks in global politics is a driver of subnational diplomacy. Cities turn to city networks to find templates for policies and technical expertise and to share lessons

and experiences through clearinghouses and knowledge bases, such as the C40 Cities Knowledge Hub on climate innovation.

This new form of global cooperation is rooted in pragmatism and problem-solving. For instance, in the first weeks of the COVID-19 global crisis, city leaders around the world were quick to connect with each other, like Seattle with Madrid, to learn from and adapt health crisis management strategies. Renewed attention to the local impact of disinformation campaigns has driven the collective development of tools for cities to counter attacks in the information and digital space. In the war in Ukraine, networks such as the Unbroken Cities channeled the solidarity of world cities by providing material support and reconstruction expertise to Ukrainian cities.

City and local leaders also leverage networking to increase the availability of international finance for local governments, often constrained by the sovereign guarantees of their national government. Mayors of the C40 Cities network, such as Dakar and Jakarta, advocated multilateral development banks about the allocation of resources directly supporting city projects.<sup>18</sup> The SDSN Global Commission for Urban SDG Finance is designing and promoting a Green Cities Guarantees Fund that would unlock financing for climate infrastructure projects in cities.

### ***Cities advocate for reforms in the multilateral system***

Although cities and local governments are on the front line of global challenges, they remain largely side-lined in the formal mechanisms of global governance. Recognizing that they are ultimately operating in a global environment with rules set by other levels of government, cities and local governments deploy new strategic efforts to increase their voice and influence in the multilateral system.<sup>19</sup>

They have had recent successes in creating a space of influence. Calls for “a more inclusive multilateralism” in the UN Secretary General’s Our Common Agenda<sup>20</sup> promote the inclusion of diverse voices beyond states, including subnational authorities, to accelerate progress on the SDGs. The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism recommended a special status for cities and regions in the multilateral system as a way to “rebuild trust in the system.”<sup>21</sup>

These advocacy efforts have been particularly successful in global climate governance. Cities and local governments can easily demonstrate the value of their

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18. “Mayors Rally for Urban Climate Finance, Urge Development Banks to Help Boost City Climate Action”, C40 Cities, March 27, 2024, available at: [www.c40.org](http://www.c40.org).

19. M. Acuto *et al.* “What Three Decades of City Networks Tell Us About City Diplomacy’s Potential for Climate Action”, *Nature Cities*, Vol. 1, 2024, pp. 452-456.

20. *Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary General*, New York: United Nations, 2021.

21. “The UN-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism Recommends a Special Status for Cities and Regions”, Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, April 28, 2023, available at: [www.global-taskforce.org](http://www.global-taskforce.org).

participation based on their share in greenhouse gas emissions and their position as implementers and regulatory authorities. This is exemplified by a forthcoming IPCC Special Report on Cities and the commitment by more than 70 nations at COP28 to the Coalition for High Ambition Multi-level Partnership (CHAMP) to cooperate with subnational governments “in the planning, financing, implementation, and monitoring of climate strategies.”<sup>22</sup>

In the field of migration and human displacement, cities are also facing intense challenges in managing the rapid growth of the population they need to service. While the majority of refugees used to live in camps, nearly 80% live today in cities, according to the UNHCR.<sup>23</sup> Yet cities becoming hubs of migration and displacement “often lack the legal mandate, resources, and capacities to address diverse human mobility flows,” especially in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Cities leverage networks to raise their collective voice as frontline managers and service providers, including through the Mayors Migration Council and the Global Forum on Migration and Development Mayors Mechanism.

## Connecting strategic subnational diplomacy to US foreign policy

National governments increasingly adapt and respond to subnational diplomacy as they recognize its strategic aspects. Some governments develop diplomatic tools and policies to provide resources and expertise and attempt to connect subnational activities to foreign policy goals. In France, the external action of local authorities, which include municipalities, *departments*, and regions, has long been considered a complement to France’s foreign and international development policy. Most recently, in 2024, South Korea established a division in the Foreign Ministry to assist local governments with their diplomatic efforts.<sup>25</sup>

The US federal government has increasingly recognized the value of a positive approach toward city and state governments’ international efforts. Under Democratic administrations, the US Department of State has cultivated a dialogue with US local governments, starting with the creation in 2010 of the role of Special Representative for Global Intergovernmental Affairs. This position evolved in 2016 into a Senior Advisor for Global Cities. It was discontinued under the Trump administration, as the US State

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22. “COP28 CHAMP: Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships for Climate Action?”, ICLEI, available at: [www.iclei.org](http://www.iclei.org).

23. See UNHCR website: [www.unrefugees.org](http://www.unrefugees.org).

24. J. Stürmer-Siovitz and A. Kallergis, “The Project is Dead – Long Live the Project: Towards Sustainable Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Urban Migration Governance in African Intermediary Cities”, *Zolberg Institute Working Papers Series*, Zolberg Institute, May 15, 2024.

25. “Heads of Overseas Diplomatic Missions Meet with Governors of Provincial Governments and Commit to Enhancing Support for Subnational Diplomacy”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, May 7, 2024, available at: <https://lby.mofa.go.kr>.

Department approached the international action of US cities through the lens of vulnerabilities to Chinese interference.<sup>26</sup>

The Biden administration reemphasized the positive role of subnational diplomacy as a channel for advancing a “foreign policy for the middle class” that centers on the needs and priorities of American communities. In October 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken created the Subnational Diplomacy Unit (SDU) and appointed a Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy.

Since its creation, the SDU has promoted itself as a front door for US and non-US local governments in the diplomatic community and developed a menu of services.<sup>27</sup> The SDU has facilitated briefings for US local leaders on the war in Ukraine, the US-China competition, and US leadership at COP. The new Lewis Local Diplomats program embeds a US diplomat in a US city to advise and provide expertise for a one-year period. The Unit engages in convenings throughout the country, such as the Cities Summit of the Americas in 2023. The SDU also created an Assembly of Local Leaders as a space to discuss how cities and local governments contribute to US national security and economic development. In 2024, the “Enhancing Subnational Diplomacy Act” was introduced in Congress to further strengthen the SDU’s function and resources.<sup>28</sup>

This new policy reflects a mindset shift and an intergovernmental approach to subnational diplomacy. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development is supporting delegations and joint research projects between US and German cities. The US Department of Defense works with a Council of Governors, connecting bipartisan governors with senior officials from the White House and US Homeland Security to inform state actors on national security and emergency management, including during the 2023 China spy balloon incident. US states’ National Guard units regularly conduct military-to-military engagements with partner nations, such as California and Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> At the international level, the US supports G7 subnational coordination on countering foreign interference through a subnational working group within the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism.<sup>30</sup>

This expansion of subnational diplomacy also goes with pushback. Based on the perception that subnational diplomacy is the soft belly of national security in relation to China, recurring efforts in the US Congress and within certain US states such as Indiana

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## A mindset shift and an intergovernmental approach to subnational diplomacy

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26. “Pompeo Warns of China Influence in State, Local Governments”, *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2020, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

27. “Subnational Diplomacy with Ambassador Nina Hachigian”, Council on Foreign Relations, February 14, 2023, available at: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

28. T. Lieu, “Rep Lieu, Ranking Member Meeks and Rep Wilson Introduce Bill to Expand State Department Subnational Diplomacy Efforts”, September 10, 2024, available at: <http://lieu.house.gov>.

29. “State Partnership Program Turns 30: A Crucial Arrow in Ukraine’s Quiver”, US Department of Defense, July 17, 2023, available at: [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

30. “Rapid Response Mechanism Canada: Global Affairs Canada”, Government of Canada, 2021, available at: <http://international.gc.ca>.

seek to limit the ability of US cities to enter into sister-city relations with Chinese cities. Tensions between the city and state levels have also led to state laws preventing cities from engaging with UN agendas, such as in Tennessee and Alabama. These examples show that subnational diplomacy does not emerge in a political vacuum: without multilevel dialogue, trust, and coordination, power competition between levels of government risks leading to lose-lose scenarios.

## Conclusion

For cities around the world, investing in subnational diplomacy is an opportunity for development and influence. As country-driven multilateralism is often gridlocked, maintaining global cooperation is shifting increasingly to the sub-national level. As city and local governments are forging connections with partners worldwide, national governments are attempting to align them to their priorities, leading to different models reflecting varying conceptions of the role of subnational diplomacy in foreign policy goals.

Non-Western powers, including China and the G77 coalition of other developing countries, may see in the rise of their local governments' global profile a potential dilution of their power and seek to coopt subnational diplomacy in service of their national interests or to promote a narrow definition of multilateralism.

As Western countries see their position in the multilateral system weakened, their attempt to harness subnational diplomacy should not be construed as a calculated way to benefit from the goodwill cooperation and leadership of their local governments. U.S. and European governments cannot afford to leave on the table the international ties and trust capital of their local governments on the global stage. They should recognize the value of their increased presence in international relations and multilateralism, which must be supported, not constrained, embraced, and not manipulated, as a new source of innovation and leadership to address the most pressing issues of our time.

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