Strengthening Foreign Policy through Subnational Diplomacy

Max Bouchet | ORCID: 0000-0003-0263-7761
Senior Policy Analyst and Project Manager, Center for Sustainable Development, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, United States
mbouchet@brookings.edu

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Summary

National foreign policy actors traditionally neglect the opportunities and challenges that local actors active on the global stage create. Cities and regional authorities have become important international players, engaging in bilateral and multilateral relations outside national borders. They exemplify a style of global co-operation perceived as pragmatic and effective. Subnational diplomacy does not undercut national diplomacy; instead, it can extend it. National governments need their cities and local governments to achieve certain domestic and foreign policy goals related to national security, competitiveness and international development. National governments also need local actors to solve 21st-century challenges linked to promoting democracy and addressing climate change, violent extremism and global migration. National governments should adapt their diplomatic tools and cultivate partnerships with their local governments to leverage their international strength, support their global reach and, where useful, amplify it.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Cities and regional authorities have become important international players, engaging in bilateral and multilateral relations outside national borders. They exemplify a style of global co-operation perceived as pragmatic and effective. Few national governments recognise and leverage the action of local actors to advance their own domestic and foreign policy interests. National foreign policy actors traditionally neglect the opportunities and challenges that local actors active on the global stage create. In some instances, rather than seize the opportunity, national governments view city diplomacy as a threat to their own turf and their sovereign prerogative to conduct foreign policy.

Yet subnational diplomacy should not be seen as taking away power from national governments by creating a parallel system that would supplant, duplicate or substitute the current multilateral order. Instead, cities and local governments can contribute to foreign policy and help revive multilateral co-operation. In countries such as Germany, India, Australia and Brazil, there has been a renewed interest in legislative proposals or new structures to more closely align the international activities of local and national governments.

In the United States, in October 2021, two members of Congress reintroduced the ‘City and State Diplomacy Act’, a bipartisan bill that would establish an ‘office of subnational diplomacy’ within the US Department of State to help mayors and governors engage with their foreign counterparts and solidify a partnership between the local and federal levels on foreign affairs.

Local leaders and city networks promoting more autonomy in international affairs should also be careful about what they wish for. They should avoid a ‘state denial’ argument that neglects the central role nation states play in international relations. Instead of seeking to circumvent or compete with national diplomacy and country-driven multilateralism, cities might influence global agendas more meaningfully through their national government’s diplomatic channels. The diplomatic instruments of national governments must evolve to enable more collaboration, dialogue and mutual reinforcement with local governments.

This essay explores why and how more connectivity and support could help harness the contribution of local governments to national foreign policy goals while better reflecting local experience and interests in solutions to global challenges.
2 For Best Foreign Policy Results, National Governments Should Leverage Local

Subnational diplomacy does not undercut national diplomacy; instead, it can extend it. National governments need their cities and local governments to achieve certain foreign policy and national security goals. They must identify where the international engagement of cities aligns with and can contribute to these goals.

2.1 Subnational Connections and Channels Can Serve Foreign Policy Goals

Relations between countries are multilayered, with a large part taking place at the subnational level. As US Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon, Jr, notes, ‘the reality is that increasingly the direction and tone of relations is less set by governments, but by people, regardless of what their national governments are doing’. Diplomats and missions in foreign countries engage with local actors daily. To conduct foreign policy, manage development projects, expand into new markets, stabilise local communities and promote democracy and transparency, they need access to a realm of leadership and connections from government, business, academia and civil society at the local level. Beyond the limited number of diplomats and foreign service and commercial officers, international relations and co-operation come alive through the engagement of local officials and leaders with their foreign counterparts.

Where nation-level actors might be unwilling or unable to engage, local ties provide more flexibility and leeway for engagement and co-operation. Ambassadors have relied on mayors going to meetings with local counterparts for intelligence and insights in settings requiring less formality. European countries use subnational engagement to maintain positive relations with countries such as Hungary and Turkey, as well as with the United Kingdom following Brexit. Initiatives such as the Pact of Free Cities in Central Europe provide powerful opportunities for national governments to support democracy in countries with illiberal tendencies at the national level. The US Department of State supports a coalition of islands, the Local2030 Islands Network, to foster local and peer-to-peer co-operation on climate change and net-zero emissions between islands from the US, such as Guam, Hawai‘i and Puerto Rico, and island countries, such as Palau and Ireland.

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1 Brookings Institution 2021.
2 Local2030 Islands Network 2021.
2.2 Protecting National Interests by Helping Cities Navigate Global Affairs

The lack of awareness at the subnational level can create vulnerabilities to malicious foreign actors. A foreign government may undermine the interests of another country by seeking out amenable cities to help advance narratives or engage in activities disfavoured by the host country. In the US, concerns over China's influence at the subnational level through university and business ties partly fuels support from legislators and diplomats for a stronger partnership with local governments. In Australia, subnational connections with China prompted legislation giving the Australian government a veto power on any arrangements between foreign governments and its local authorities, potentially putting city diplomacy 'at risk'.

Instead of having to overturn local action, national governments need to create a dialogue with local governments to anticipate legal dead ends. For instance, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied publicly to the request from 170 mayors, including the Mayor of Paris, to recognise the autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan. The Foreign Minister communicated to recognise the large Armenian diaspora in France and the subnational relations with Armenia while stating the country's diplomatic stance. A constructive dialogue let local governments take official positions while avoiding 'rogue' subnational actions and clashes with national interests.

2.3 City-to-City Co-operation Amplifies International Development and Assistance

International development policies should integrate the contribution of local authorities to the provision of development assistance abroad. Cities and regions increasingly engage in development co-operation, providing technical services and funding to their peers. In Japan, Yokohama’s Y-PORT initiative shaped a model of city-to-city development co-operation that exports technical skills and experience in urban development to cities of Southeast Asia. A formal agreement between Yokohama and Japan's national development aid agency JICA supports these local projects by providing additional funding and expertise from the central government.

Cities influence their nation's brand and soft power. Instead of leaving this local show of goodwill on the table, national governments can amplify it. The French government recognises and integrates the role of local authorities in its

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3 Pejic, Kosovac and Acuto 2020.
4 Le Figaro 2020.
5 City of Yokohama 2013.
humanitarian and international development strategy. Through programmes such as EXPE-CT, the government provides funding and certifications to decentralised co-operation programmes between French and foreign local governments. In 2021, subnational development co-operation amounted to EUR 122 million in projects between 4,500 local French authorities and more than 3,000 foreign local governments across 138 countries. The government finances up to 70 per cent of these projects, allocating grants in a way that incentivises project alignment to issues and regions relevant to the priorities of France’s international aid strategy.

2.4 The International Economic Engagement of Local Governments Serves Domestic Growth and Prosperity

As growth engines, cities and metropolitan areas develop strategies to attract foreign direct investment, talent, innovation and technology through trade missions and economic partnerships. City governments, economic development organisations and regional chambers of commerce cultivate trust and relationships with their foreign counterparts and businesses. These channels can be more robust and further elevated with support from national governments. In the United States, the Department of Commerce provides export training to local actors, while embassies overseas support subnational agreements and trade missions, such as a recent partnership between the Hauts-de-France region and the state of Maryland. Because cities and local governments channel a brand of international engagement linked to domestic prosperity and tangible economic benefits, subnational diplomacy emerges as one tool for a ‘foreign policy that works for middle class Americans’ promoted by the Biden-Harris administration.

Closer alignment on economic international engagement using local expertise and knowledge can help avoid short-sighted policies that threaten local growth and prosperity. For instance, the 2018-2020 trade stand-off and tit-for-tat tariffs between the US and its main partners in North America, Europe and China signalled a divergence between a national economic priority (attempts to increase economic competitiveness) and local outcomes (disruptions in local supply chains and the imports of critical materials threatening local manufacturing). Business leaders and local officials responded to this

6 French Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021a.
7 French Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021b.
8 Gootman, Barker and Bouchet 2019.
10 Parilla and Bouchet 2018.
national policy by warning about its harm for local communities, highlighting that national competitiveness is rooted in local economies with thriving international connections.11

3 The Multilateral Response to 21st-Century Challenges Requires Local Knowledge and Leadership

Issues that cut across national boundaries such as demographic shifts, the effects of climate change, violent extremism and technology disruptions are transforming international relations. A multilateralism order based exclusively on relations between countries seems increasingly ill-equipped to address these new challenges.12 Multilateral institutions are saddled to find commonly agreed solutions among nations that lead to collective action. They often struggle to advance progress due to gridlocks and geopolitical tensions. National governments cannot solve 21st-century challenges alone. Cities and local governments are on the frontlines of many of these challenges and claim a role in the policy space to shape global solutions and policies. They are increasingly associated with multilateral platforms, such as the UN, COP and the G20, but with limited influence. At the same time, nation states often lack local knowledge when negotiating international policy solutions.

3.1 Fighting Organised Crime and Violent Extremism Takes Place Locally

National growth and prosperity rely on the stability of urban spaces, which are the 'new frontier for international security'.13 Local governments and police forces develop tools and expertise to secure global cities used as nods and shelters by transnational trafficking, terrorism and organised crime actors.14 Cities engage in international networks and campaigns such as Peace In Our Cities and the Strong Cities Network, which is supported by the US Department of State. National governments can also learn from community-based approaches to violence prevention that cities use, such as Durban’s Safer Cities strategy and Mexico City’s PILARES community centres.15

11 Wetterich 2020.
12 Jones, Feltman and Moreland 2019.
15 Locke, Pipa and Bouchet 2019.
Countering violent extremism and radicalisation also increasingly takes place at the local level. For instance, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) develops programmes of investment to prevent or counter ideologically motivated violence with a focus on strengthening and influencing local institutions. Approaches that empower and engage entire communities through connections to local governments and mayors’ offices demonstrate higher long-term effectiveness to prevent violent extremism.16

3.2 Local Governments Are Key to Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Cities count among the most vulnerable spaces to environmental phenomena exacerbated by climate change, including heat waves, hurricanes and flooding. They also account for more than 70 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions. The global community increasingly recognises that implementing climate plans and curbing emissions requires multilevel action with cities and local governments through investments in people, energy, transportation, housing and infrastructure.

However, nation states rarely include local leadership in international climate negotiations. The latest COP kept mayors outside the official negotiating circle unless national governments added them as officials to their delegations. Meanwhile, cities are increasingly active in elevating ambitious targets and commitments to address climate change, such as the 1,049 cities and local governments now part of the ‘Race to Zero’ initiative, representing 722 million people around the world.17 National governments should more closely integrate this leadership in their plans and support local governments to follow through on their commitments: research shows that many cities still lack the capacity and data to make meaningful assessments of their progress.18

3.3 Global Migration Governance Requires Local Action and Expertise

Global migration governance requires local expertise.19 While managing borders is a national prerogative, local governments face the consequences of migration as integration engines and providers of infrastructure. Local governments were kept on the sidelines of the consultation for two major international frameworks, the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. A global movement of cities emerged

17 C40 Cities 2021.
19 Stürner 2020.
to fill this gap, promoting the establishment in 2018 of a formal link to the state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). The Mayor’s Migration Council (MMC), an international mayors-led network, promoted the creation of a Global Cities Fund for Inclusive Pandemic Response to support cities facing migration challenges related to the global pandemic, receiving support from philanthropy and multilateral platforms (including the Paris Peace Forum and UN agencies).  

4 National Governments Must Adapt Their Foreign Policy Toolkit

Cities are already running their own international strategies. National lawmakers and diplomats have a choice. They can ignore it, which risks wasting opportunities and creating vulnerabilities for their national interests. They can try to control it through domination, which risks weakening reputational and economic power at both the local and national levels. Or they can cultivate a constructive partnership and dialogue with local governments to leverage their international strengths while protecting their autonomy.

4.1 Recommendation: Include Curriculums on Subnational Diplomacy within Diplomatic Academies

More and more governments provide training on the foreign relations of local governments. The German Federal Foreign Office experimented with a session on ‘city diplomacy’ within its ‘International Diplomats Training’ programme. The US Foreign Service Institute also tested a series of sessions on city diplomacy within its ‘Global Affairs 101’ seminar for new foreign service officers. While these two approaches were experimental, they both spurred new insights and inspiration for their participants. This training would benefit from co-operation with universities developing programmes on subnational diplomacy.

Nation states should build a culture within their diplomatic system which meaningfully integrates local action in foreign policy and enables channels with national Sherpas and delegations on multilateral platforms. This requires increasing awareness among diplomatic ranks about the international action of local governments.

20 Mayors Migration Council 2021.
4.2  **Recommendation: Increase the Number and Appeal of Domestic Postings for Diplomats**

Retired or active diplomats sometimes choose to serve in local government to advise local officials. But few countries have a structured mechanism to detail diplomats at home as a step forward in their career. The US City and State Diplomacy Act would enable the secondment of civil service or foreign service employees to local government. Other countries provide examples: since 2015, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs seconds to the Interior Ministry thirteen experienced diplomats at any given time to advise prefects in each region. They provide connectivity with local authorities to increase co-ordination on international economic development, migration and security matters.

The tradition and culture of these institutions consider domestic postings as less rewarding than postings abroad or close to power at the headquarters. Recognising the value of domestic postings and the experience they provide should create incentives and rewards in the foreign service career and promotion paths.

4.3  **Recommendation: Create a Dedicated Office to Support the International Action of Local Governments**

That office should play a consultant role by providing tools and briefings to local leaders about foreign policy. It should aim at building a constructive dialogue fostering trust, relationships and transparency between diplomats and local governments. It should also offer security training to protect sensitive economic and technological information and outgoing missions by local leaders to foreign locations. In partnership with diplomatic academies, this office could also offer training for the international affairs staff of local authorities to provide a baseline toolkit on global affairs, especially for cities with low levels of resources.

Legitimate concerns surround the creation of a special envoy position and additional bureaucracy dedicated to subnational diplomacy. But existing examples, including the bureau supporting subnational action within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DAECT), show that a dedicated office can meaningfully support external action without creating a burdensome policy process for either cities or the central government.

4.4  **Recommendation: Develop a Comprehensive Map and Database of Subnational Relations**

Every Ministry of Foreign Affairs should keep track of the exchanges and agreements promoted by their subnational governments to grasp the depth of relationships taking place at multiple levels of governance. For instance,
the French government keeps updated an open data map showing subnational projects focused on promoting gender equity worldwide,\textsuperscript{21} as well as a database of all subnational development co-operation projects.\textsuperscript{22}

This information bank can enhance co-ordination across national agencies (economic, security, agriculture, etc.) to support local actors in their international engagement. Monitoring subnational activities can also help anticipate vulnerabilities and threats when cities engage with malicious actors.

5 Conclusions

Subnational diplomacy provides a model of engagement with the world that nation states can benefit from. The outcomes of international city engagement are measured by more sustainable, thriving and prosperous local communities. More nation states should take notice and adapt their diplomatic tools. National governments must cultivate a constructive partnership with their local governments to support their global reach and, where useful, amplify it.

By creating a direct link between foreign policy and benefits at home, subnational diplomacy contributes to an ‘American foreign policy [which] must support domestic renewal’.\textsuperscript{23} If it becomes law, the ‘City and State Diplomacy Act’ introduced in the US Congress will pave the way to a stronger partnership between cities, states and the federal government to advance foreign and domestic policy goals. While the US claims a return to multilateralism, the country needs to leverage this soft power on the global stage.

Bibliography


\textsuperscript{21} French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs 2020.
\textsuperscript{22} CNCD 2021.
\textsuperscript{23} Burns 2020.


**Max Bouchet**

is a senior policy analyst and project manager at the Brookings Institution, affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Development in the Global Economy & Development Programme. Connecting with scholars, diplomats, businesses and city and community leaders from countries of the Global South and North, he researches the making of stronger local communities. He co-manages the Brookings SDG Leadership Cities network convening senior city leaders from around the world to advance sustainability and inclusion. Max has combined his research on global cities with a Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship (Global Governance Futures 2030) and a Policy Center for the New South Fellowship (Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leader). Previously, he was chief analyst of Conway, Inc., an Atlanta-based economic development consulting firm. Max graduated from the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po Paris, France) with a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and a Master’s degree in Public Affairs.