FP

ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

The United States Needs Subnational Diplomacy More Than Ever

In a volatile moment, mayors and governors can be a source of ballast and stability on the world stage.

OCTOBER 25, 2024

*By **Jon Temin**, and **Max Bouchet***

In 2017, around the time U.S. President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, more than 400 U.S. cities and counties stepped into the leadership void and adopted ambitious climate action goals. And this September, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the United States for the United Nations General Assembly meetings, he sat down with Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro before meeting with presidents and presidential aspirants.

Zelensky and Shapiro's visit to a factory in Scranton that makes munitions for Ukraine is an example of subnational diplomacy, a fast-growing field in the United States in which governors, mayors, and other local officials take a direct role in world affairs. The uptick comes just in time. With a monumental election just days away, the United States might swerve from global engagement to retrenchment once again. Foreign partners have always had to deal with changing administrations in Washington, but rarely have they had to deal with the ever-present risk of such volatility. Subnational diplomacy builds more layers and durability into the fabric of the United States' international partnerships. It thickens the country's global diplomacy when Washington leans into alliances, and—by building lasting relationships among leaders at many levels—keeps it in vital conversations and forums on transnational issues when the federal government retreats.

Powers like China and France have long understood the strategic value of building relationships at the local level. Additional investments and actions are now needed from the federal government, local governments, and the private sector to accelerate U.S. subnational diplomacy and position governors and mayors to be a source of ballast and stability on the global stage.

FOREIGN POLICY, AND the way the United States connects with the world, has never been solely about Washington. The Biden administration recognized this with its early focus on a "foreign policy for the middle class." Because foreign policy has deep implications for local communities, U.S. cities and states are increasingly connecting with partners abroad to advance their interests, in turn influencing how the world perceives and interacts with the United States. In our work at the Truman Center, we've mapped more than 3,000 data points on individual relationships between U.S. cities, states, and foreign counterparts.

Subnational diplomacy has moved past the framework of sister cities and city-to-city relations focused on soft academic or cultural exchanges. Local leaders confront global challenges at their doorstep: from water scarcity in Phoenix, to Chinese interference in New York, to defending democracy against authoritarian impulses in many locales. Mayors and governors have no choice but to think globally, taking on the role of ambassador for their community, and cultivating ties with partners around the world to accelerate trade, innovation, and investment. It is now common to see U.S. mayors networking with their peers abroad to influence global agendas, with large local delegations at every United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) climate meeting and cities like Houston becoming global champions for energy transition. Some encounters are making waves: California Gov. Gavin Newsom's trip to China in 2023, for instance, was a major development in both areas. Foreign countries are frequently reaching out to local U.S. governments to advance their interests; in the majority of cases this is well-intentioned, but recent headlines highlight the national security risks involved.

To be clear, subnational diplomacy is not a substitute for strong leadership from Washington. Given the necessarily centralized nature of the federal government's official relations, governors and mayors can't sign treaties or deploy the United States' military might. But what they can do is maintain some of the country's global engagement across political cycles, and they can do so across the political spectrum.

While Washington remains polarized, local leaders from both parties are engaging in global affairs, often independent from the national political climate. The participation of 14 major U.S. cities in C40 Cities, a network of mayors focused on combating the climate crisis, demonstrates to the world that a significant portion of the United States remains committed to combating the crisis, even when Washington chooses a different course. Similarly, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb's visit to Ukraine in September was an opportunity to express full support for Ukrainian sovereignty. Holcomb, a Republican, was the first U.S. governor to visit Ukraine since the war began, and the trip culminated with the signing of a bilateral agreement between Indiana and Ukraine on technological, agricultural, and cultural collaboration. The

ability of local leaders to transcend national politics makes them essential to maintaining the United States' global presence, no matter who controls the White House.

Despite the momentum, the United States still lags behind its partners and competitors in how it resources and supports subnational diplomacy. Countries like Japan, South Korea, and France have a long history of employing subnational diplomacy as a complement to centralized foreign policy and supporting it with funding and expertise. China has also leveraged the subnational space to advance its interests, and the U.S. intelligence community recently signaled the risks related to the cooptation of subnational diplomacy by China to advance malign goals, including illicit influence on political campaigns and dissuading engagements with Taiwan.

To its credit, the Biden administration has responded to falling behind in subnational diplomacy by creating a new Subnational Diplomacy Unit (SDU) at the State Department, which serves as the department's front door for U.S. mayors and governors and is headed by a former ambassador and Los Angeles senior official. Among its achievements are bringing hundreds of leaders from the Western Hemisphere together for a historic summit and initiating a program to place State Department foreign and civil servants in the offices of U.S. mayors and governors. Changes to the State Department's organizational chart rarely attract much attention, but the creation and growth of the SDU is an unheralded success. Further steps are required, though, to strengthen U.S. subnational diplomacy.

FIRST, THE PROGRESS made at the State Department with the SDU must be institutionalized. Draft legislation to mandate this function at the department has languished, meaning the SDU has limited capacity to meet the demand for its assistance and future administrations can easily do away with it. Passing that legislation should be a priority, including during the coming lame-duck session, so that regardless of the upcoming election's result, more robust support for subnational engagement becomes a mandated State Department function, matching the level of support provided by foreign countries to their own subnational diplomacy strategies.

Second, while subnational leaders are accelerating their bilateral engagement abroad,

they should be more engaged in multilateral spaces. U.S. cities are notably absent from the United Cities and Local Governments organization, one of the most prominent global networks that allows cities to set the agenda. Leaders of major U.S. cities and states should also consider creating new global subnational coalitions on urgent transnational issues where they don't already exist, such as rising authoritarianism, mirroring effective domestic

subnational coalitions that have recently formed on issues such as reproductive rights. They should do this regardless of the election's outcome, but the networks will be especially relevant if former President Trump wins.

Finally, a combination of public and private sector interests should create an innovation fund for subnational diplomacy to support primarily small- and medium-sized U.S. cities to elevate their global engagement. There are significant disparities between the ability of these cities and their larger counterparts to conduct diplomacy, which quickly becomes a geographic equity issue. The fund could help cities and states hire an international affairs lead on the mayor or governor's team to build expertise and diplomatic muscle, or support related capacity-building. It could be a public-private partnership or be primarily private (led by a combination of philanthropic foundations and private companies) in the event of an uncooperative federal government.

The United States' federal structure is one of its greatest strengths, because it nurtures skilled leaders in cities and states who wield real influence. But when it comes to diplomacy, those leaders are too often overlooked. When Washington is globally engaged, it leaves influence on the table when it doesn't mobilize talented subnational leaders to amplify and buttress its diplomacy. When Washington retreats, those same leaders can maintain vital relationships and keep the United States in key conversations. In either scenario, investing in subnational diplomacy isn't a luxury: It's imperative for national security.

Jon Temin *is the vice president of policy & programs at the Truman Center for National Policy and Truman National Security Project.*
Max Bouchet *is deputy director for city and state diplomacy at the Truman Center for National Policy.*

Easy to share PDFs are a benefit of your Foreign Policy subscription.

Not an FP subscriber? Unlock unrivaled global news and analysis, including 50+ years of Foreign Policy coverage online and in the magazine, when you become a paying subscriber.
View membership offers.

Foreign Policy Magazine is a division of Graham Holdings Company. All contents ©2024, Graham Digital Holding Company. All rights reserved.