

## DIPLOMACY IN CRISIS, SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY EVOLVES

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### **A pivot to subnational diplomacy**

The import of cities to foreign policy is historically rooted in their contributions to national power. For instance, the embassies they hosted served as gathering places for national representatives and allies to engage in discussion and negotiations. Cities were of global importance as being sites of populations and economic power, but not necessarily places for policymaking and influence on the global stage (Klaus, 2021).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, national governments, including the U.S. and China, have evolved their approach to subnational diplomacy in recognizing that, beyond just capital cities and urban centers, even secondary and tertiary cities have considerable policymaking influence and are fertile ground for diplomatic engagement (Klaus, 2021). This especially rang true when it came to addressing global challenges like climate change, where coordinated yet place-specific policymaking across varying locales is necessary to curb its progression. Over the last 20 years, cities have nurtured robust transnational municipal networks aimed at “horizontal collaboration” for tackling global problems. A simple logic of purpose and efficiency often informs such networks: mayors recognize the unique needs of their residents, and remaining active in global networks allows them to advocate for the interests of their residents on the international stage and discuss their concerns around topics like climate change, health, and migration (Curtis and Klaus, 2024c). National governments and international organizations have taken notice of their evolving role in world affairs and the unique coordination needed to create impact. Both have adapted their approach to global governance to include cities and foster relationships with nontraditional entities in addressing transnational challenges and developing further influence.

Cities became valuable to national governments not only for diplomatic engagement but also for geopolitical competitiveness. In the United States, the transition to viewing cities as geopolitical actors gained traction during the Obama administration, particularly

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through a growing emphasis on cities as nodes in global governance. As an example, on the sidelines of the 2015 Paris Agreement, the administration endorsed a pledge from 117 mayors in the United States to collaborate on tracking climate risks and coordinating mitigation and adaptation efforts (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

China recognized the strategic value of cities and began investing in them to gain influence. Most notably, President Xi Jinping's 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marked a formalized escalation of this approach. Through its investment in infrastructure and urbanism in over 140 countries, representing roughly two-thirds of the global population, China gained influence in these locales and projected its political and economic culture beyond its borders (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BRI, Xi delivered a speech where he remarked:

The BRI, drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road and focusing on enhancing connectivity, aims to enhance policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity, inject new impetus into the global economy, create new opportunities for global development, and build a new platform for international economic cooperation... Belt and Road cooperation has expanded from physical connectivity to institutional connectivity. Important guiding principles for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation have been laid down, which include the principle of "planning together, building together, and benefiting together," the philosophy of open, green and clean cooperation, and the goal of pursuing high-standard, people-centered and sustainable cooperation (Xi, 2023).

China, through the BRI, exemplified to the world the geopolitical power that comes with cooperation and connection to the world's cities. As argued in *The Belt and Road City: Geopolitics, Urbanization, and China's Search for a New International Order*, "BRI puts urban corridors and infrastructure-building at the heart of its vision for a reshaped international order... and is the first modern example of an explicit linkage between transnational corridor-building and great power geopolitical strategy" (Curtis and Klaus, 2024b).

Cities offer impact locally but also at scale, and by forming relationships with them through infrastructure investments, national governments have attempted to foster a particular interdependence among communities across the globe. This level of interdependence is being re-examined now, and as geopolitical relationships shift, city officials are left to reconsider the relationship between national support and their existing global relationships.

## **Diplomacy and geography**

This recognition of the diplomatic power of cities may well have reached an apex in the 2020s. The U.S. Department of State created a Subnational Diplomacy Unit (SDU) in October 2022. The SDU was created to "lead and coordinate the State Department's engagement with mayors, governors, and other local officials in the United States and around the world...by integrating local ideas into foreign policy and fostering connections among cities, municipalities, and communities in the United States and abroad" (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Part of institutionalizing the priority of subnational diplomacy stemmed from then-President Joe Biden's own corridor-building approach. As Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus have argued, the U.S. borrowed a little from China's conception of geographical linkages, developing relationships and investment strategies in regions where the BRI had yet to gain significant influence (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). This strategy aimed to advance U.S. leadership in the investment of foreign infrastructure. Biden's own post-COVID-19 domestic economic policy, "Bidenomics," emphasized the need for public investments in domestic infrastructure revitalization, global partnerships, and international cooperation. His National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, highlighted these efforts as linkages between foreign policy and diplomacy and domestic economic prosperity (Sullivan, 2023).

This all followed on the heels of the 2021 G7's Build Back Better World infrastructure plan with the Global South.<sup>1</sup> This strategic approach was further articulated by Biden himself, who stated:

The United States is committed to using our resources and our international platform to support these voices, listen to them, and partner with them to find ways to respond that advance human dignity around the world. For example, there is an enormous need for infrastructure in developing countries... Done the right way, however, with transparent, sustainable investment in projects that respond to the country's needs and engage their local workers to maintain high labor and environmental standards, infrastructure can be a strong foundation that allows societies in low- and middle-income countries to grow and to prosper. That's the idea behind the Build Back Better World (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a, p. 5).

The West was now playing catch-up to the over ten-year corridor-building work that China has done through the BRI. Part of this catch-up included investment in the Trans-African Corridor by the U.S.-led Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) and the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which sought to bolster the West's position in geopolitical competition with China (Curtis and Klaus, 2024b).

In addition to its participation in PGII, the United Kingdom also made moves to counter China's foreign investment within its own borders. The Chinese firm Huawei was set to develop 5G infrastructure across the UK before it pulled out of the deal, in part due to diplomatic pressure from the U.S. (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). Also in Europe, Germany, under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, began integrating subnational approaches that curtail China's reach in its economy. In its China Strategy, Germany emphasized an overarching "de-risking" approach, given the country's reliance on China as its largest trading partner and the imbalanced nature of China's dependencies on Germany and Europe more broadly. China's reliance on Europe is in decline, whereas Germany, at the time, relied on China in important sectors, like the field of medical technology and medicinal products (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2023). Germany emphasized the important role city leadership has played in building partnerships with China and, therefore, expertise on China. Its approach highlights the need for coordination with its numerous *Länder*, towns, cities, and municipalities when it comes to how it proceeds with China (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2023).

1. G7 Summit "Build Back Better World," June 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50361/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communique.pdf>.

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Beyond nations, urban networks, like C40 Cities and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) organization, the Global Parliament of Mayors, and ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, have played a contributive role in shaping the agendas of multilateral forums like the G20 and the aforementioned G7. Both forums have, in turn, emphasized the role of subnational diplomacy in global governance. The G20, for instance, created the Urban 20 (U20) and the G7 created the Urban 7 (U7) to strengthen urban alliances and better coordinate recommendations on global challenges with the G20 and G7 member countries (Urban 20, 2017). In 2023, the G7 summit in Japan explicitly recognized the importance of subnational governments in the climate agenda by establishing the G7 Roundtable on Subnational Climate Actions. The summary report of the roundtable noted the need for national support in promoting subnational climate actions and recognized:

Subnational climate actions reinforce the virtuous cycle by addressing multiple urban challenges. These are recognized not only for climate mitigation and adaptation but also for revitalizing local economies, enhancing people's well-being and health, and environmental conservation in both national and local contexts (Ministry of the Environment, Japan, 2023, p. 6).

However, the logic behind the formation of subnational networks is actually their greatest threat. In their 2025 paper "Transnational city networks and the climate agenda: a historical perspective and current trends," Marta Galceran-Vercher, Octavi de la Varga, and Ricardo Martinez argued that "growing geopolitical tensions, ... the increasing influence of political discourse critical of climate action, and above all the intensification of climate change impacts seem to foreshadow a global governance context in which city networks will need to experiment and innovate in order to maintain – and especially expand – the reach of their environmental agenda" (Galceran-Vercher et al., 2025, p. 252). Two truths can exist when it comes to city diplomacy. Global challenges and national tensions threaten its effectiveness, but they also highlight the necessity of city diplomacy in responding to them. As national and international actions threaten many diplomatic relationships as we know them, city diplomacy is offering channels for maintaining these relationships.

## Diplomacy upended

Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 U.S. presidential election accelerated the decline of what was already an increasingly contested liberal international order. The weakening of diplomatic and development institutions, both national and multilateral, like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G20, and G7, has implications for city diplomacy. City leaders are adapting their diplomatic strategies accordingly.

One of the Trump administration's defining messages is an "America First" approach to shoring up U.S. competition against China. However, unlike China's approach to gaining economic influence through investment in global infrastructure, the administration has upended the global order and pulled back from decades of alliances with democracies like Canada and France (Trofimov, 2025). The administration has disrupted not only those relationships with harsh tariffs, but also those and many

across the globe by disbanding “soft-power” institutions, like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). For over 60 years, the U.S. has engaged in forms of subnational diplomacy through these core institutions.<sup>2</sup> In their absence, the practice of subnational diplomacy is being tested. As city leaders established themselves as actors in their own right on the global stage, they have practiced diplomacy within the global order framework established by national and multilateral powers. However, the deconstruction of that global order by those same national and multilateral powers leaves city officials to grapple with how to maintain their international connections, which have now become vital to their cities’ local economies and, in some cases, culture. Kyle A. Jaros and Sara A. Newland, in their 2025 Truman Center report on “Bridges or Battlegrounds? American Cities in a Changing US-China Relationship,” found that in the face of national political tensions with China, city officials are strategically maintaining relations with the country. This includes, for some subnational entities, continuing climate and energy policy dialogue with China and maintaining established MOUs, like that of green shipping corridor agreements between Los Angeles and Shanghai and Guangzhou. The report found that, “when local actors feel that the political optics of China engagement are poor but the economic rationale for engagement is strong, some are engaging in quieter forms of paradiplomacy” (Jaros and Newland, 2025, p. 17). This includes—to boost foreign direct investment (FDI)—city leaders urging the federal government to issue U.S. tourist visas to Chinese nationals, and representatives advocating for soybean farmers to maintain that trade relationship, which slightly improved during the Trump Administration’s October 2025 trip to Asia and the resulting US-China trade truce. At the same time, city leaders acknowledge that other areas of trade with China, such as reliance on technology, could be reduced (Jaros and Newland, 2025). Residents in places like Des Moines, Iowa, and Los Angeles, California, understand the relationship with China as vital to their local economies. Locals see the federal actions against China as potentially damaging to their prosperity, a reality that is at odds with the administration’s perceptions of what decoupling with China could do for the U.S. economy (Jaros and Newland, 2025).

To be sure, cities remain powerful instruments of geopolitical influence. As the U.S. government complicates these subnational channels in its competition with China, it has also recognized cities as a strategic policy lever for gaining geopolitical influence in important sectors. The Trump administration acknowledges the importance of subnational relationships in advancing its interests. At the beginning of the second term, it announced an investment in a digital infrastructure strategy called Stargate. The administration is teaming up with major technology companies for a \$500bn investment in computing infrastructure, like data centers, for artificial intelligence (AI) across the U.S. and abroad in places like the United Arab Emirates (OpenAI, 2025). However, success in this investment in digital infrastructure across the U.S. will require cooperation and collaboration with cities and their residents. The remote community of Abilene, Texas, in Taylor County—a county that President Trump solidly won in the 2024 U.S. presidential election—is the first city partner in the United States on this project. Weldon Hurt, the mayor of Abilene, and the locals have embraced what they regard as an investment in their city and county, despite wider worries about the strain that new data centers may put on Texas’s already squeezed electric grid (Williams, 2025). Such collaboration and assistance help

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2. As an example, since 1997 USAID partnered with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to deliver technical assistance in urban management to cities around the globe. For USAID, locally led development projects were a top policy priority. For instance, USAID’s Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (USAID CCBO) program, which was carried out in close collaboration with both national and municipal governments, was successfully completed in Indonesia in 2024.

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with the project's overall aesthetic appeal and the integration of construction activities.

For much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a broad emphasis on the role that subnational jurisdictions play in both strengthening and pivoting relationships with foreign actors. While city diplomacy cannot replace the role of national diplomacy, it is now recognized as an influential part of foreign policy. As Jon Temin and Max Bouchet argued in their 2024 article, "The United States Needs Subnational Diplomacy More Than Ever," in the U.S. case, "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" (Temin and Bouchet, 2024). As national relationships restructure their reliance on one another, subnational jurisdictions are left to grapple with how they conduct business and diplomacy and deliver benefits from their international relationships to their residents. Nowhere is this challenge more apparent than in the largest subnational jurisdiction in the United States: California.

### Case study: the view from California and other subnational jurisdictions

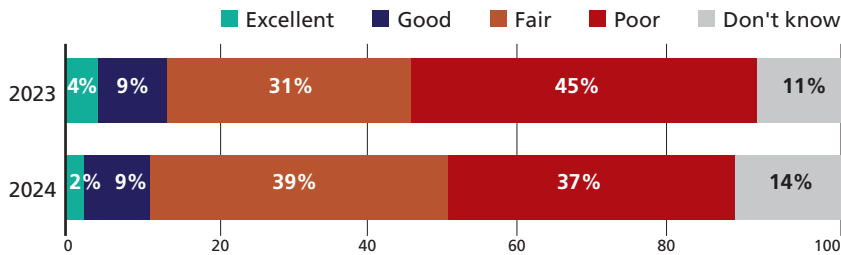
Subnational jurisdictions across the globe are weighing in as influential geopolitical actors because in this globalized world they see that what happens abroad affects how they operate at home. The largest subnational jurisdiction that shares this sentiment, and perhaps the most influential in terms of cultural and economic impact, is California. California has played host to high-level diplomatic events, marking its value in global affairs. For example, Woodside, California, was the chosen location of the November 2023 meeting between former U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, which aimed to repair U.S. and People's Republic of China ties (Baldassare et al., 2024). This meeting occurred on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Meeting in San Francisco. The following year, leaders from the International Network of AI Safety Institutes gathered in San Francisco to address global coordination around the safety, regulation, and innovation of AI. The proximity to high-level and influential diplomatic events, as well as their role in the global economy, shape how residents connect with the world. The annual Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey captures how aware Californians are of living within a foreign policy actor, despite at times not recognizing the benefits.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2024 survey, Californians believed in the importance of U.S. global leadership in ending international conflicts, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. They also had opinions on the relationship between the U.S. and China, with a plurality thinking the relationship is important but not especially strong, as seen in Figure 1, which captures responses from both 2023 and 2024 (Baldassare et al., 2024).

3. Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey, <https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/carnegie-california?lang=en>.

Californians also believe the United States should play a leading role in preventing nuclear proliferation (64%) and in addressing climate change (57%) (Baldassare et al., 2024). Overall, Californians want the U.S. to lead in global affairs, yet the survey also found that they do not necessarily want California itself to play this leading role, which highlights the complexities of subnational diplomacy.

**Figure 1: Q: How would you rate the current state of relations between the United States and China**



Source: 2023, 2024 Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey  
2023 N= 1,500, 2024 N=1,499

In 2023, California’s Governor Gavin Newsom went on a trip to China to have a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping and lead a delegation focused on climate action and economic cooperation. California city leaders like Fresno’s Mayor Jerry Dyer led trips to places like Tokyo, Japan, to learn about downtown revitalization and high-speed rail, and San Diego’s Mayor Todd Gloria led a trade mission to South Korea to strengthen economic ties and attract foreign investment (Frank and Jordan, 2024). All these trips were taken to strengthen California’s economic opportunities and ties to the world. Of the Californians who support state and local international engagements like the ones above, they are supportive of California officials engaging with leaders from other nations on climate action (47%), trade (21%), and cultural exchange (10%). Despite Newsom’s high-profile trip, their local leaders’ fact-finding missions, and the overall alignment in priorities, in both the 2023 and 2024 surveys, when Californians were asked whether they support state and local engagement with leaders from other nations, about two-thirds of Californians responded “no” or “don’t know.” So, while there has been an increase in global engagements by subnational leaders, the benefits of these engagements are not as obvious to residents as global engagements from national leaders.

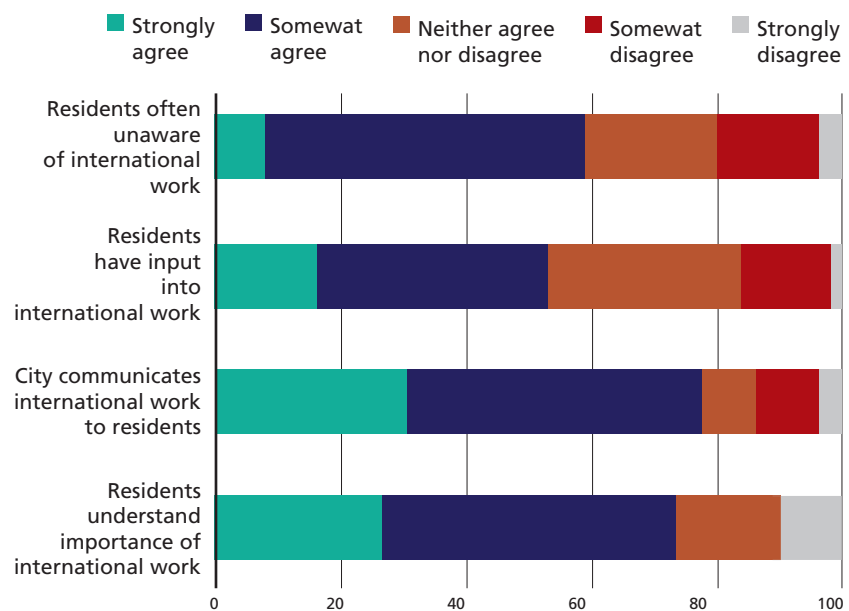
The findings from the Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey track with an international survey Carnegie California produced with the University of Melbourne in 2024. The 2024 Cities and International Engagement Survey captures an overall growth in cities’ international activities and attention from national governments to cities’ geopolitical influence. The growing attention and recognition of cities as important players on the international stage partly stems from the necessary coordination among cities in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the rise of international conflict as seen in Gaza and Israel, and Ukraine and Russia; migration, especially along the

U.S.-Mexico border; the rise of emerging technologies, like AI; and the push for national legislation around the creation of climate-resilient infrastructure (Pejic et al., 2025).

The survey, much like the California Global Affairs Surveys, found that climate change (82%) remains the top priority that most cities center their international engagements around, followed by economic development and trade (39%) and migration (33%).

The survey's affirmation of city officials being geopolitical actors is evident in the increased level of foreign policy engagement with cities and other subnational actors on the part of national governments. The survey found that 69% of cities were contacted at least once every three months by national governments regarding their international work, and more cities (84%) reached out to national governments at least once every three months about international issues (Pejic et al., 2025). Yet, much like the Carnegie California Global Affairs Surveys, the Cities and International Engagement Survey found that the communication of their cities' international engagements often fails to increase resident awareness about their international work (and its benefits). The survey found that "over three-quarters of participants (77 percent) said that their city actively communicates to their residents about their international work". Cities reported, however, that despite these communications efforts, their residents are often unaware of their international work, as captured in Figure 2 (Pejic et al., 2025, p. 14).

**Figure 2: How cities rate the perception of their residents regarding their international work (n=49)**



Source: 2023, 2024 Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey

Furthermore, the survey found that it is often argued that local governments can more effectively conduct international engagements that reflect their communities' needs over national governments, due



to their proximity to resident priorities. Yet “these findings suggest a growing relationship between national and local governments on international arrangements and potentially a disconnect in local community awareness of city diplomatic activities” (Pejic et al., 2025, p. 15). So, while national governments are more privy to cities’ international engagements, local communities remain unaware.

Local officials may find greater support from their residents for their subnational engagements if they democratize their approach. Bringing residents in early on to develop their priorities and identify international partners could increase constituent buy-in. A number of democracies, both national and subnational, have utilized deliberative democratic approaches to policymaking. California is currently experimenting with a new digital and deliberative democracy program designed to foster dialogue between Californians and their government, informing policy decisions and building trust (Klaus and Weinberg, 2025). The approach recognizes the need for policymakers to better listen to and engage with citizens, avoiding capture by special interests and the pitfalls of referendum-based decision-making, which can lead to voter fatigue and polarized outcomes. Further, it opens a window for sharing the reasoning behind particular policy priorities. Integrating deliberative democracy strategies in how city leadership conducts international affairs could help expand education on its benefits and close the gap in local support.

Cities’ acts of policy independence demonstrate a distance from national agendas and, when empowered, can present an opportunity to maintain beneficial global relationships.

## Conclusion

Subnational jurisdictions and their diplomatic efforts have an increasing set of opportunities and challenges before them. In the United States, they are sites of contestation, with many facing threats to funding, either directly or indirectly through their institutions, if they do not align with the Trump administration’s political agenda. Sanctuary cities, for instance, have been threatened with cuts to federal funding if they refuse to comply with the administration’s immigrant deportation efforts. Universities across the country are at risk of losing federal funding if they do not restructure to fit the administration’s anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agenda.

Cities in the United States and abroad are essential sites for national governments to learn about current global relationships and restructure them as needed. But cooperation from subnational jurisdictions is necessary to conduct this exercise. Cities’ acts of policy independence demonstrate a distance from national agendas and, when empowered, can present an opportunity to maintain beneficial global relationships. This is a difficult time for diplomacy. And this includes city diplomacy. On the U.S. side, federal offices, like the former U.S. Department of State’s Subnational Diplomacy Unit, which strengthened trade and alliances by supporting the capacity of subnational jurisdictions to lead those efforts, have been and are being dismantled. The U.S. is removing itself from international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement, for the second time.

However, municipal diplomacy has several features that national diplomacy does not. It can pursue those advantages now, to the benefit of local residents, and share global agendas. Cities and states can serve as a steady hand in advancing diplomatic relationships in the face

of national government volatility. While trade wars between nations threaten the livelihoods of individuals who rely on global trade, and national leaders withdraw from critical international agreements, city leaders, like those in California, are advocating for continued global engagement to boost their populations' economic prospects and tackle global challenges. Policymakers are learning what this tense geopolitical moment means for subnational diplomacy, but for the time being city leaders are continuing to engage with their foreign partners and thereby solidifying their global influence.

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