

It Is Time for the United States to Institutionalize Subnational Diplomacy

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The start of the Biden-Harris administration presents the United States with the opportunity to harness subnational diplomacy to solve domestic and global problems. The primary delivery mechanism for this should be the establishment and permanent institutionalization of a Subnational Diplomacy Office (SDO) in the Department of State, headed by an ambassador-at-large. The administration can accomplish this by supporting the passage of the bipartisan City & State Diplomacy Act passed by the House of Representatives in 2020 to create such an office.

A first functional SDO was created by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she appointed Reta Jo Lewis as special representative of global intergovernmental affairs in the Department of State. While this innovative office was dissolved in 2013, its success in advancing U.S. global goals in the economic, strategic, and environmental arenas is [well-known](#). It is time to establish a permanent SDO that carries out the following functions for the following ends.

Integrate subnational government climate action into federal action

To avert a catastrophic global temperature rise of 2° Celsius above pre-industrial levels, the United States and other nations must commit to substantially greater emissions reductions. [This can be accomplished](#) through integrating the emissions reduction commitments made by cities, businesses, and other local actors into the calculation of countries' nationally determined contributions under the Paris Accord. The time for the United States to do so is now as it rejoins the accord and an SDO can facilitate this process.

The White House should reestablish through executive order the [State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force On Climate Preparedness and Resilience](#), a mechanism linking local officials to the White House. The order should designate at least two SDO functions. First, gathering data on the emissions-reduction commitments made by local authorities within the task force and ensuring these are incorporated into the calculation of the United States' nationally determined contributions. This will help increase the ambition of emissions reduction commitments. Second, serving as the main intermediary between local authorities in the task force and international climate initiatives. This should include assisting city and state participation in the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities constituency of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the main platform for local governments in climate negotiations. Since the 2010 Conference of Parties, when local governments were first [recognized as "governmental stakeholders,"](#) delegations of U.S. subnational authorities in UNFCCC negotiations have been an [ongoing and important tradition](#).

The groundswell of subnational climate action efforts that emerged in response to the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Accord are now some of the [most important tools at the federal governments' disposal](#) in strengthening climate policy. As the new administration rejoins the accord and reestablishes stringent climate-mitigation policies, it must integrate these initiatives—notably the U.S. Climate Alliance, America's Pledge, and We Are Still In—into its efforts. An SDO could carry out this process, relieving the burden carried by the offices of mayors and governors in coordinating them. When these initiatives were launched, they stretched thin the staff of state and local leaders in coordinating the advocacy, communication, and other activities involved with such inter-city/state activities.

An SDO should also facilitate access to international sources of expertise for carrying out effective urban climate governance. This includes environmentally oriented transnational municipal networks, such as ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability and C40, that share increasingly standardized community-level emissions accounting methodologies as well as the climate policy models and software to implement them. These networks and other fora also allow cities to share their best practices. Further, other nations and their cities wish to learn how U.S. cities conduct climate policy and an SDO could help arrange international exchanges, creating yet further valuable opportunities for sustainability-interested U.S. locales.

Connect locales with international supply chains for more effective health emergency preparedness and response

This is urgently needed to effectively link U.S. subnational governments to international sources for public health and other supplies when these are not available domestically, as has been the case in the coronavirus pandemic. Locales struggled to obtain supplies from abroad but eventually did: New York [sourced thousands of ventilators from China](#); Maryland [sourced test kits from South Korea](#); and Broussard, Louisiana [sourced related supplies from its Canadian sister city of Cap-Pelé](#), among other examples. An SDO can establish direct international pipelines to quickly equip locales with these resources when in need. The United States has learned during the pandemic that decentralized efforts of international procurement can be too slow. Establishing international procurement supply chains can allow for improved response not only to pandemics, but also to disaster relief, climate change, and other emergencies.

During the onset of the pandemic, U.S. cities scrambled to form new public-health networks to enable sharing resources and knowledge, but they were beset by lack of time and capacity. The UN diplomatic community and the [International City/County Management Association](#) helped cities exchange and access the resources, data, and knowledge needed to better manage the crisis, to recover, and to improve resilience to future pandemics. Hence, leaders from New York City to San Francisco see the prospect of an SDO as a promising direct means of better connecting U.S. cities to resources for pandemic management. As with procurement and supply chains, leveraging the power of these knowledge networks can accelerate the deployment of policy innovations for emergency response of virtually any sort.

Connect state trade offices to consular resources abroad to maximize exports and attract investment

Significant untapped export and job-creation potential exists for U.S. firms seeking to internationalize, which can be helped by an SDO connecting local firms and governments to the resources of U.S. embassies and consulates for entering foreign markets. The export-assistance services of the U.S. Department of Commerce's Foreign Commercial Service (USFCS) supply the rapidly growing demand from local businesses by lever-

aging the connections of embassies and consulates, including to trade associations, governments, and business elites. While state and local governments' foreign trade offices handle an increasingly large amount of export-assistance demand, their resources are dwarfed by those of the USFCS.

By linking state and local government's foreign trade offices and local firms to these resources, an SDO can more fully connect internationalizing firms to foreign markets, maximizing exports and investments. This potential is [shown for U.S. trade with China](#) and beyond. Further, the need for this function has existed for decades. A 1990 cable from the U.S. embassy in the Netherlands states that "[it would be helpful to establish in Washington a well-publicized office to assist local government officials and groups to plan their overseas visits in order to optimize their chances of meeting their trade, investment and tourism goals.](#)" This describes precisely the proposed role of an SDO.

Coordinate with locales on soft power to communicate human rights values abroad

The United States lags behind rival powers such as China in equipping local governments with international-affairs capacities and coordinating soft-power efforts to communicate political values. Chinese local government Foreign Affairs Offices institutionalize subnational diplomacy across several areas, including soft power, to [shape narratives](#) favorable to China and advocate for policies in its interests, including reducing U.S. support for Taiwan and exhibiting its authoritarian governance model as an example for the world. The United States lacks anything comparable, to the detriment of its soft-power goals, including the communication of human rights values.

Enhanced efforts coordinated by an SDO could involve the addition of soft-power components to existing exchanges. For example, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs in the Department of State has a [state partnership program](#) that works with local police and prisons. This program brought a delegation from Louisville, Kentucky to Senegal to provide protest-related training. U.S. practices shared during the visit conveyed the United States' respect for human rights that contrasts strongly with that of China, Russia, and many other states. An SDO could expand such exchanges between U.S. local and foreign counterparts across a range of governance areas while improving soft-power projection capability.

Integrate local officials and initiatives into the bilateral and multilateral frameworks, dialogues, and summits to which the federal government is party

The federal government can more immediately and effectively achieve the governance goals sought by its participation in major international convenings by directly involving mayors, governors, and other local leaders. As they house most of the world's population and economic wherewithal, cities will be the implementation sites of solutions to pandemics, climate change, and most other global governance matters on which nations convene. For example, the Urban 20 (U20) is a network of city governments [seeking greater representation for in G20 decision making](#) on pandemic recovery, climate action, and international economic development goals. An SDO would help U.S. cities join the U20, thus better representing urban voices in national decisions in the G20 and bringing to bear the political and economic capacities of cities, strengthening multi-level capacity to achieve these goals.

U.S. participation in multilateral security institutions, such as NATO and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, can better build counterterrorism capacity from the bottom-up by having an SDO integrate the [Strong Cities](#)

[Network](#), which shares resources for the prevention of violent extremism among U.S. and other cities. The Department of State should also reinstate the [U.S.-China Governors Forum to Promote Sub-National Cooperation](#), for which U.S. participation was discontinued in 2020. An SDO would coordinate U.S. participation in the forum, strengthening bilateral trade, investment, and technology exchanges by locales on both sides. This would also provide a pathway for future subnational dialogue on more sensitive issues, such as human rights and democracy, that remain crucial unfinished matters in bilateral relations and global governance. An SDO can replicate this approach with bilateral dialogues with other nations.

Further, new roles for peacebuilding-oriented city and citizen-diplomacy networks can be woven into bilateral and multilateral security frameworks. This includes long-standing city networks, such as People to People International, Sister Cities International, and Global Ties US, that carry out citizen diplomacy, cultivating long-term peace outcomes through greater inter-societal understanding.

Track the international engagements of local governments and leverage data power to enhance diplomacy

Tracking the myriad interactions between U.S. locales and their foreign counterparts will produce a full picture of local-global engagements, making clearly visible the landscape of U.S. subnational diplomacy, and allowing us to understand how and where it can enhance U.S. foreign policy and the goals of internationalizing communities. An SDO Data Center would link with local leaders across the public, private, and civic sectors to coordinate the keeping and sharing of records on: city and state international exchanges of government personnel for training or best practices sharing in any area of policy or public administration, and what was exchanged; memoranda of understanding between U.S. local governments and foreign counterparts; international sister city relationships; city government memberships in transnational municipal networks; commitments to or signatory status in international initiatives; trade missions; cultural exchanges; and many more across sectors.

These data would enable an SDO and the federal government to determine how best to serve the international interests of local governments, businesses, and other organizations. This may include the SDO providing targeted assistance to internationalizing communities to achieve public administration, commercial, technological, place branding, educational or other goals. It could also enable the Department of State to more fully understand the extent of Chinese subnational engagement in the United States and provide local elected leaders with tools to effectively manage outreach to counterparts in China or any other nation.

An SDO could further integrate U.S. locales into the global data-analytics communities of direct relevance to urban governance, feeding relevant data into global repositories actively used by cities. For example, cities beginning or continuing climate-change mitigation policy benefit from knowing what sustainability targets their neighboring cities are setting. This information is becoming increasingly available through reporting systems of city, region, and business climate actions and commitments, including the UNFCCC's Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action, The carbonn Center, and the Carbon Disclosure Project. The more U.S. cities are aware of and given the opportunity to report their climate actions and commitments to these systems, the more these will be available for the benefit of other cities.

Beyond affording U.S. cities greater access to valuable information, integrating them into emerging global-subnational data analytics frameworks can create new funding opportunities too. For example, the Leadership for Urban Climate Investment initiative is a joint effort by the OECD and the Climate Policy Initiative to standardize data tracking of subnational climate-finance flows worldwide. By linking locales and relevant data into this initiative, an SDO can help U.S. cities and states opportunities access international climate-finance opportunities that they may otherwise miss. The above benefits will similarly extend to virtually all other areas of public administration, allowing the data-tracking function of an SDO to strengthen the multilevel governance of increasingly internationalizing governance areas.

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