



BRIEF 3.1 GUIDELINES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS WITH CONFLICTING OR HARMFUL INTERESTS AND MOTIVES

Engagement with foreign entities can bring benefits when properly conceived and conducted. However, when dealing with foreign governments that have conflicting or harmful interests, local communities face risks. Increased due diligence and vigilance enable local governments to avoid pitfalls and common areas of concern when engaging with foreign officials and affiliated partners that are adversarial in their interests and motives.

1. The challenge: managing power asymmetries in subnational engagement.

As local governments increase their global engagement, they may be exposed to foreign actors seeking to exploit these channels to negatively influence and interfere in local governance. Foreign governments and their intermediaries may seek to influence or pressure local governments in other countries, exploit economic or other dependencies, or undermine other countries' national-level policies (see side box 1).

State and local governments must understand the contexts and risks before engaging internationally. This is especially important when dealing with countries that are strategic competitors, have authoritarian governments, or present significant power asymmetries. These governments often use a top-down approach to subnational diplomacy, leveraging the local level to advance their interests in a way that may conflict with host country policies and values. Understanding these risks helps local officials calibrate their approach, mitigate potential harm, and evaluate whether opportunities exist for beneficial exchanges in areas such as investment, trade, tourism, and education.

China represents the largest-scale practitioner of top-down subnational diplomacy characterized by three key features.

- i. **Local-national relationship:** Organizations like the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and other United Front Work Department-affiliated entities present themselves as civil society organizations, but function as extensions of the Chinese Communist Party. China's Military-Civil Fusion strategy blurs the distinction between commercial, academic, and security interests. China's provincial and municipal governments operate within a hierarchical political structure; though local leaders do have some autonomy, subnational diplomacy in China is managed in a much more top-down way than is typical in federal democracies like the U.S.

Understanding foreign influence and interference on a threat spectrum:¹

Most governments engage in **foreign influence** to increase their global appeal, promote their values and culture, and shape local perceptions and decisions in other countries. Foreign influence encompasses legal and transparent "soft power" activities, including diplomatic outreach, cultural promotion and education exchanges, or public advocacy.

Foreign malign influence differs in its intent as it uses tools of soft power to advance narratives or shape public opinion in a way that undermines domestic politics and communities in the host country.

Foreign interference represents another threat level as it uses covert, deceptive, coercive activities and other tools of "sharp power" to disrupt democratic processes, create societal divisions, or advance interests contrary to those of the host country.

Foreign influence and interference may be difficult to identify as they take place in a **"gray zone"** of actions deliberately designed to remain below thresholds that would trigger clear responses—often deniable, incremental, and integrated into legitimate activities.

¹ Diana Fu. "Distinguish Foreign Influence from Foreign Interference," In *Getting China at Home*, edited by Jessica Chen Weiss. Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, February 2025.

- ii. **Asymmetric partnerships:** China's provincial or municipal entities often have resources, authority, and political backing far exceeding those of their foreign counterparts, creating structural imbalances in negotiations and agreements.
- iii. **Transactional approach:** Chinese engagement typically operates on transactional principles, with benefits provided in exchange for specific concessions or actions often related to issues deemed politically sensitive, including ties with Taiwan and human rights. Economic incentives, including the realization of investment projects, may come with implicit condition or be withdrawn to exert pressure. Despite these challenges, local governments can exercise caution and their own leverage in these relationships. They can clearly communicate about their values and conditions, including being upfront about expectations regarding human rights improvements or cooperation on issues like countering fentanyl production.

2. Strategic guidance for risk-aware international engagement.

Establish clear engagement protocols before entering international relationships.

- Develop clear criteria for evaluating potential foreign partnerships and define what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable terms of engagement.
- Conduct thorough due diligence to know who you are meeting with. Research prospective partners' background and affiliations.
- Vet the source of funding for proposed initiatives or sponsors of travel. Funding linked to foreign governments should generally be refused for travel or accommodation of your local political leader or delegation.
- Develop a simple risk assessment framework for international engagements. Rate potential partnerships across key risk factors (e.g., transparency, reciprocity, alignment with local priorities, legal or reputational vulnerabilities) to guide decision-making.

Practice proactive engagement to shape relationships on terms beneficial to your community.

- Maintain control of the engagement agenda rather than accepting predetermined frameworks: negotiate engagements on your own terms and decide what you seek from a partnership (e.g., cultural exchanges, education, FDI).
- Keep agreements specific rather than nebulous. Specific memoranda of understanding can be more useful as opposed to broad and unspecific twinning arrangements). Craft precise language with clearly defined scope.
- Establish expectations early. Emphasize transparency, honesty, and reciprocity when engaging with foreign governments. Don't blindside counterparts on sensitive issues—upfront and clear communication is more effective.

Prepare for and resist pressure.

- Don't accept agreement language contradicting your values or policies (e.g., on Taiwan, human rights, and the protection of minorities). Use your leverage and impose your conditions.
- Refuse quid pro quo pressure. Don't be pressured to change a stance or to criticize national policy in return for investment or other benefits.
- Create scenarios and use serious games to identify blind spots and think creatively about risks.
- Develop response protocols for potential pressure tactics rather than reacting ad hoc. Be prepared for assertive, forceful, but non-binding communication from foreign officials, including from embassies.

Build a diverse network of advisors and consult with national security officials when appropriate.

- Widen the circle of country advisors to diversify voices informing international partnership decisions. Develop relationships with diverse representatives from diaspora communities and avoid overreliance on individuals who claim exclusive representation of community perspectives.
- Establish relationships with academic institutions or think tanks that specialize in foreign policy to access research, historical context, and expertise when evaluating potential partnerships.
- Consult with peers when vetting foreign organizations. Leverage networks for shared intelligence and experience.
- Maintain regular communication with relevant national government agencies (e.g., on export controls, research integrity and security, inbound and outbound investment screening, keeping untrusted vendors out of critical infrastructure, etc.). Consult with national security authorities when partnerships raise concerns.

Safeguard critical assets, information, and people.

- Develop secure policies and protocols for the use of technology during international travel, especially phones and computers.

- Exercise caution regarding cooperation in areas requiring heightened scrutiny, such as technology transfer, defense, critical infrastructure, and specialized manufacturing.
- Maintain control over official communications and media engagements. Proactively negotiate the terms of media engagement and issue your own press releases.
- Avoid making blanket and generalized statements about foreign countries that could stigmatize diaspora and heritage communities living in your region.

By developing these capacities, state and local governments will be better positioned to navigate on their own terms the increasingly complex landscape of subnational diplomacy worldwide.

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About this Toolkit: Strategic guidance based on experiences from the field.

State and local leaders receive visiting foreign delegations, opportunities for international partnerships, and pressure to engage globally—but no clear guidance on how to do it right. This Toolkit provides that strategic guidance, building upon the insights and best practices from a group of innovative city, state, and regional government leaders from nine countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States

The result is a practical guide organized around the core challenges local leaders face most often. It provides strategic guidance to:

- Build an international strategy that serves community's priorities while avoiding common pitfalls (Briefs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)
- Manage relationships that create economic opportunities and jobs (Briefs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3)
- Navigate security threats and potential risks (Briefs 3.1, 3.2)
- Turn international connections into influence and resilience (Briefs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Each brief includes specific steps and real examples from local leaders, experts, and practitioners. If you're using this Toolkit to apply an innovation locally or have questions or suggestions, [please fill out this short survey](#).