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GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT, LOCAL BENEFITS:

*A STRATEGIC SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY
TOOLKIT FOR CITY, STATE, AND LOCAL
LEADERS*

INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy from the ground-up: the global engagement of state and local governments

Diplomacy is no longer the exclusive tool of national governments. Cities, states, provinces, and regional governments have emerged as influential actors on the global stage, using their political influence, economic weight, and capacity for innovation to engage internationally and advance their communities' interests. This growing phenomenon, known as "subnational diplomacy" or "state and local diplomacy," creates new layers and opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagement while amplifying traditional diplomacy. Subnational diplomacy has evolved to be an imperative.

The question for local leaders is not whether they should engage globally—it is how to make this engagement strategic, purposeful, risk-aware, and outcome-oriented.

Why is strategic global engagement essential for state and local leaders today?

1. Economic competition is increasingly local.

Companies do not just choose countries to invest in—they choose specific cities and regions. Mayor- and governor-led trade missions around the world strengthen export bases and attract foreign businesses. Sporting events and cultural vibrancy elevate a region's global profile, attracting job-creating investments and tourism. Distinctive industry advantages and innovation clusters require public-private-academia collaboration at the local level. Strategic partnerships with foreign governments and businesses deliver real results: innovation, factories, and jobs.

2. Global threats hit local communities first. Supply chain disruptions in energy and critical minerals affect local communities and workers. Foreign malign influence and interference specifically target local officials, seek to divide communities, and weaken local trust from within. Cyberattacks target city water systems and local election databases. Extreme weather events and disasters require local responses and coordinated, cross-border approaches. Local leaders need to anticipate these global risks and build partnerships that help them respond effectively. A mayor or governor who knows how peers handled similar challenges is better equipped to protect residents.

3. Addressing global challenges requires coalitions of local problem-solvers. Tested solutions often come from other communities facing similar challenges in fields such as sustainable development, mobility, and housing. Instead of waiting for national governments to act, local governments can tap into global networks of

innovation to solve problems better, faster, and cheaper than those going it alone. Through global coalitions, local governments shape agendas of collective action that often surpass the level of ambitions of national governments. These locally-driven relations based on shared challenges buttress global cooperation.

When approached strategically, global engagement delivers tangible benefits to local constituents while strengthening global cooperation and security. Economic partnerships can go sideways without proper due diligence. Cultural exchanges can become political liabilities if handled poorly.

In today's interconnected world, communities that invest in smart strategic international engagement will thrive. Those that do not will risk falling behind—vulnerable, isolated, and missing opportunities their residents need.

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](#).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit draws from experiences and best practices shared by local leaders and partners. Appropriate attribution was maintained where possible. Some content was edited for brevity and anonymized when shared under [Meridian House Rule](#).

"Insights from the Field" case studies appear as written contributions from local governments and organizations with minimal editing for clarity and consistency. Each case study is attributed to the contributing jurisdiction. The editor gratefully acknowledges the written contributions from:

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Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy (January 2025)

On August 12, 2024, Meridian International Center received a grant from the U.S. Department of State to implement a Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy in partnership with the Truman Center and the Melbourne Centre for Cities. The convening took place on January 15 and 16, 2025 at Meridian International Center in Washington, DC. On January 25, 2025, Meridian was instructed to suspend work on the grant. The suspension was lifted on March 6, 2025. On June 5, 2025, the grant agreement was terminated.

Participants in the Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy included:

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Emma Gowling, Australian Capital Territory
Jordan Walsh, Embassy of Australia

CANADA

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