



BRIEF 1.4: FORMALIZING SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH MOUs AND SIGNED AGREEMENTS

As mayors, governors, and other local leaders explore cooperative frameworks and deploy political influence at the global level, they increasingly formalize subnational diplomacy through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and other signed agreements. Cities, regions, and states can engage globally with flexibility and agility that national governments, bound by treaties and the slower pace of negotiation, often cannot match. While subnational competencies abroad are legally limited and nonbinding, operating within those limits also enables rapid, proactive, and tangible global engagement.

Between 2021 and 2026, 44 U.S. states signed 60 MOUs with foreign partners according to Meridian data. Cities of all sizes leveraged this tool as well: between 2010 and 2024, U.S. city leaders signed more than 110 MOUs or other agreements with international partners (not counting Sister City partnerships), according to the [Truman Center Multilevel Diplomacy Map](#).

While signed agreements often become a default expectation, they are not created equal nor an end in themselves. These agreements vary widely in scope and function, from broad relationship frameworks to sector-specific cooperation on trade and investment, education, technology, climate, transportation, culture, and public safety. **MOUs are both a political instrument and framework for turning ad hoc exchanges into platforms for sustained and long-term collaboration.** While they often connect two governments, strong MOUs connect regional ecosystems of actors together – across trade, business, culture, and innovation. Effective MOUs clarify purpose, build buy-in from partners and institutions that will carry the work forward, and create a pathway for implementation.

1. The Challenge: Avoiding Dormant or Ceremonial Signed Partnerships.

MOUs and other signed agreements can be valuable political and diplomatic instruments for a city, a state, or a regional government. They confirm bilateral commitment, outline joint goals, signal shared priorities or values, and expand the foundation for joint action. When well calibrated, they bring visibility and political credibility to subnational diplomacy.

However, an agreement can just as easily create a familiar problem: a partnership is signed, announced, and then left dormant once the political moment passes. Dormant MOUs generally reflect a mismatch between an agreement's public purpose and the practical structures needed to sustain cooperation. The agreement may be too broad, vague, or disconnected from the realities of implementation on the ground. It may list specific sectors for growth without buy-in from those sectors' stakeholders. It may overemphasize the signing ceremony without a plan for what comes after.

Not every relationship requires a formal agreement. Trade missions, investment promotion, cultural celebrations, educational exchanges, and other activities can all advance a relationship without one. Local leaders should be selective when partners request to sign an agreement. A small number of high-value MOUs with clear strategic fit, committed counterparts, and realistic follow-through are more valuable than a large portfolio of ceremonial ones.

The challenge for practitioners, then, is to calibrate an agreement's design from the outset, converting the political value of an MOU into a practical framework for action. The considerations below cover the full arc: scoping, stakeholder buy-in, and post-signature stewardship, to build agreements that deliver lasting value to residents.

2. Considerations for Designing and Sustaining Agreements.

The relationship is what defines the MOU. An MOU is an adaptive and selective tool, rather than a rigid instrument applied to every engagement. The decision to pursue an MOU should be driven by the partners and the goals for the relationship. Strong MOUs begin with relationships that already exist: companies exploring export markets, universities

exchanging students or research, industries with complementary sectors, ports seeking new business opportunities, or institutions hosting foreign delegations. These existing relationships provide the practical foundation for an MOU: partners already have a shared interest, an established point of contact, and a reason to remain engaged after signature. The goal is not to invent partners for the agreement, but to focus and coordinate the ones already there.

Build early buy-in. Early stakeholder engagement helps prevent the agreement from becoming aspirational language without dedicated stewards. Practitioners should confirm which agencies and partners are prepared to participate, where counterpart interest is strongest, and what level of follow-through is realistic.

- **Internally:** consulting relevant offices — Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture, or local port authority — to understand priorities and capacity.
- **Externally:** testing broader interest and buy-in with businesses, schools, universities, hospitals, cultural institutions, diaspora communities, and other stakeholders that may already be working with foreign counterparts or positioned to benefit from cooperation.

Effective MOUs connect two ecosystems, not just two governments. The strongest MOUs extend beyond the two signing governments to activate a broader ecosystem of implementers. Because international engagement can sit outside the normal scope of state government, a formal document can help signal that partners are serious.

i **Insight from Indy Economic Development:** *"Implementation rarely occurs solely between the signatories. The agreement with Markham, Canada was structured around creating opportunities for: Businesses; Universities; Innovation organizations and economic development professionals. Ultimately, those institutions are the actors that create lasting value from a partnership. Practitioners should identify implementation partners prior to execution of an agreement and involve them in the MOU development process."*

MOUs are a combination of a political signal and a framework for focused action. An MOU often combines the following goals:

- **Deepen and structure a relationship.** Signed agreements give current or future partners a framework and a shared roadmap for continued collaboration.
- **Accelerate and focus action.** Create pathways for future engagement that help partners coordinate more effectively and translate shared priorities into a manageable sequence of working-level actions.
- **Draw attention to a relationship.** Signing ceremonies involve a powerful press and media component, which can be useful to countries or state/local leaders seeking to communicate about their commitment to a relationship or values.
- **Respond to a broader development or crisis.** National and international events often create new openings for formalized subnational diplomacy. An MOU lets local leaders act where national channels are slow, constrained, or absent. Local leaders may sign agreements to secure supply chains or preserve trade and economic exchanges in the face of federal tariffs; show solidarity with foreign and diaspora communities affected by a conflict abroad through symbolic or material commitments; or maintain their own policy commitments amid a shifting federal policy stance.

Balance flexibility with specificity. Agreements should be specific enough to focus collaboration, but flexible enough to remain relevant as priorities and circumstances change. Naming priority sectors creates useful direction and momentum. Overly detailed commitments quickly become outdated.

i **Insight from Indy Economic Development:** *"Flexibility can be more valuable than detailed commitments: One aspect of our MOU with Markham is that it identifies priority sectors and collaboration areas while avoiding highly prescriptive commitments. Instead, it establishes a framework for business engagement, research collaboration, talent development, trade & investment promotion, and government-to-government knowledge sharing. This flexibility allows the relationship to evolve as new opportunities emerge without requiring amendments to the agreement."*

Focus agreements on areas where the interests of both parties align and where the state has a clear role and authority. The agreement should identify credible areas of cooperation without trying to address every issue at once. Pennsylvania's [Joint Declaration of Intent](#) with Germany, for example, focuses on workforce development, apprenticeships, and vocational education – areas that are a priority for Germany and where the Commonwealth has substantial policy and programmatic authority. Pennsylvania also avoids linking agreements to major infrastructure projects that depend on federal decision-making or other critical external actors, keeping commitments within the Commonwealth's ability to influence and deliver.

Ensure follow-through: distinguish facilitation from implementation. A mayor or governor's international affairs office often facilitates the political and diplomatic process, sending the political signal, convening stakeholders, and helping set priorities. Follow-through depends on working relationships across technical agencies and outside partners that deliver specific activities: trade promotion, research collaboration, workforce pathways, technical exchanges, sector convenings. A strong MOU should create a runway for the partners responsible for carrying the work forward and build in the structure to hold them accountable:

- **Assign ownership.** The MOU can make clear who will keep the relationship moving diplomatically and who will carry forward each practical workstream. Practitioners should set expectations for roles, responsibilities, and follow-through at the outset, including who is responsible for maintaining the relationship and who is responsible for advancing each area of cooperation. This distinction prevents confusion after signature and gives partners a realistic point of contact for follow-up.
- **Pair the agreement with a working group or action plan to keep it moving.** Establishing a working group responsible for producing an outcome-oriented work plan within six months can ensure follow-through, with a regular cadence for reviewing progress.
- **Empower implementers and keep the follow-through flexible.** If priorities are still emerging, help refine and adapt activities after signature. This gives working-level partners room to adjust course while creating a track for reporting progress to executive leadership and stakeholders. Universities or gateway institutions such as ports, for example, may prefer to pursue their own institutional partnership agreements, letting government catalyze the cooperation while shifting implementation to the organizations best positioned to carry it forward.

 **Insights from Indy Economic Development:** *"Relationship management matters as much as project management: Successful MOUs require ongoing stewardship. While activities and projects are important, so is regular communication, executive engagement, working-level follow-up, new stakeholder recruitment, and continuous identification of opportunities. Many of the most valuable outcomes emerge over time through relationships that were initially created or strengthened by the agreement itself."*

Visibility does matter. Leverage it. The signing moment is a highly anticipated moment that should be paired with the launch of a concrete next step, such as a delegation, stakeholder meeting, implementation call, investment conversation, sector roundtable, or joint workplan. They can also use the next convening of a leader from the foreign delegation – or a trade mission being organized by foreign counterparts – as a benchmark date for communicating progress and demonstrating momentum.

 **Insights from Indy Economic Development:** *"Pair political visibility with a concrete next step. Discussions regarding initial activities, stakeholder engagement, and ownership should begin before execution of the agreement. Momentum is often highest immediately following signature and can be difficult to recreate later if implementation pathways have not already been identified."*

Choose a timeline that supports continuity and review. A three- to five-year MOU term is generally long enough to build relationships and demonstrate results without locking partners into outdated priorities. Within that period, schedule regular follow-up discussions for principals and working-level staff, with timelines for specific deliverables where appropriate. These milestones help keep partners accountable and maintain momentum, while the end of the term provides a natural point to review progress, reassess priorities, negotiate updates, and determine whether to renew, revise, or conclude the agreement. Scheduled quarterly internal interagency meetings and bilateral meetings can help get on the same page and sustain progress.

Measure outcomes and communicate value. Measuring success requires distinguishing among activities, outcomes, and longer-term relationship value. The public ultimately needs to understand what the relationship is producing. Practitioners should therefore track progress in ways that support both internal management and clear communication of results. See [Brief 1.3. Proving Value: How to measure and communicate the local impact of global engagement](#) from this toolkit for guidance on how to measure and communicate the value of subnational diplomatic engagement.

Examples of Signed Partnerships

Signed partnerships take many forms. Some become platforms for trade and investment. Others support research partnerships, workforce development, technical cooperation, recurring exchanges, values-based engagement, or annual convenings that keep partners returning to the relationship. The common thread is that the MOU opens the door, invites continued engagement, and creates a track for adapting cooperation as new opportunities emerge.

A trade and investment platform

- Example: [California GO-Biz and Japan Business Federation Trade and Economic Development MOU](#), which established a formal Trade and Investment Desk between the California Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz) and Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) to facilitate business expansion, investment attraction, and commercial partnerships. The agreement created a practical mechanism for connecting companies, identifying investment opportunities, and supporting collaboration and innovation.
- The United Kingdom's trade MOUs with [Indiana](#); [North Carolina](#); [South Carolina](#); [Oklahoma](#); [Utah](#); and [Washington](#), which focus not on federal issues like tariff policy but on facilitating investor introductions, trade missions, and access to procurement markets.

A sector innovation and supply chain partnership

- Example: [Massachusetts - Nova Scotia Offshore Wind MOU](#), which created a platform for collaboration on offshore wind workforce development, transmission planning, grid integration, port infrastructure, supply chain development, stakeholder engagement, and public education.

A technical cooperation channel

- Example: [Florida Department of Environmental Protection-National Institute of Environmental Research \(South Korea\)](#) agreement on harmful algal bloom management includes working level scientific information sharing, joint research, and environmental problem-solving.

An educational pathways program

- Example: [Dakota State University-Seoul Media Institute of Technology MOU](#), establishing graduate pathways in artificial intelligence, computer science, cybersecurity, and cyber operations, while promoting joint research and academic collaboration.

A workforce development mechanism

- Example: [Maryland - South Australia Economic MOU](#), which commits the parties to collaborate on defense workforce development and skills capability, and connect firms in defense, cyber, space, and autonomous systems. The agreement demonstrates how an MOU can help educational institutions, employers, and government agencies develop the talent pipeline needed for emerging industries and major international partnerships such as AUKUS.

A platform for advancing specific economic and institutional relationships

- Example: [Indianapolis \(Indiana\) - Markham \(Ontario\) agreement](#), which was designed not as a ceremonial document but as a framework for collaboration in areas where both communities demonstrated existing strengths and opportunities for mutual benefit, including life sciences, advanced manufacturing, innovation ecosystems, motorsports, major events, talent development, and investment attraction. This agreement formalized an economic relationship that already had strategic rationale, stakeholder interest, and identifiable opportunities for collaboration, rather than attempting to create those conditions after signature.



Insights from the Field

Pennsylvania: *"The MOU doesn't define the relationship, the relationship defines the MOU."*

Pennsylvania's 2026 agreements with **Ontario** and **Germany** illustrate a highly selective approach to formalizing international partnerships. Rather than pursuing agreements for their own sake, the Commonwealth focuses on a small number of relationships that already demonstrate strategic alignment, stakeholder interest, and long-term potential.

Pennsylvania's [MOU with Ontario](#) emerged from an already strong relationship rooted in geography, economic integration, and Great Lakes cooperation. Ontario sits just 13 miles from Pennsylvania at the closest point, and the partnership benefited from existing engagement through the Council of the Great Lakes Region and the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers, where Governor Josh Shapiro serves as Chair and Premier Doug Ford serves as a member. Through intentional conversations between principals and working-level partners, the parties identified shared priorities in energy, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, life sciences, and technology, then created mechanisms including trade missions, exchanges, annual reviews, and a joint working group to advance those priorities over time.

Pennsylvania's [Joint Declaration of Intent with Germany](#) followed a similar process. The agreement is built on longstanding Pennsylvania-German ties, including deep diaspora connections, significant German investment in the Commonwealth, the state's longstanding Sister-State relationship with North Rhine-Westphalia, and shared interests in manufacturing competitiveness and workforce development. Through continued engagement between principals and working-level stakeholders, the partners narrowed their focus to apprenticeships, career and technical education, vocational training, and workforce development, areas where both saw clear mutual benefit, strong stakeholder interest, and practical opportunities for sustained cooperation.

In both cases, Pennsylvania used the path to a formal agreement as an opportunity to deepen and define the relationship itself. Through a series of intentional conversations between principals, agencies, subject-matter experts, and external stakeholders, the partners identified where interests aligned, where meaningful cooperation was possible, and which organizations were prepared to help carry the work forward. Those discussions helped shape the substance of the agreement, establish working-level structures, and build the shared commitment needed to sustain collaboration after the signing ceremony.



Insights from the Field

How Washington State Leverages Natural Partners for Effective MOUs

Washington demonstrates how a dedicated international affairs function can help turn diplomatic relationships into durable cooperation. Unlike most states, Washington's Office of International Affairs was established by the state legislature with a mandate, staff capacity, and resources dedicated to international engagement. Rather than viewing MOUs as stand-alone diplomatic products, the office uses them as tools to organize and advance relationships that already have economic, institutional, or community foundations.

Before pursuing an agreement, the Office of International Affairs works across state agencies, universities, ports, businesses, local governments, and community organizations to determine where genuine interest, capacity, and alignment already exist. The office then uses that foundation to convene stakeholders, build buy-in, and facilitate the conditions for implementation so that cooperation can continue generating value long after the signing ceremony. This strategic and facilitative role has helped Washington develop agreements rooted in existing momentum.

Washington's [partnership with Kyiv Oblast](#) illustrates this approach. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Washington built on longstanding ties with Ukrainian communities and partners: the state is home to approximately 85,000 Ukrainians welcomed in under various programs, including roughly 55,000 refugees welcomed before 2022 and an additional 24,000 Ukrainian parolees after the invasion. The signed agreement grew from that commitment as well as preexisting diaspora, business, and government-to-government ties that connected Washington to Ukraine. Rather than creating a relationship from scratch, the MOU provided a framework for strengthening and expanding cooperation among governments, institutions, and communities already invested in Ukraine's recovery and long-term development.

Washington's burgeoning [relationship with Denmark](#) takes another approach. Denmark's leadership in industrial symbiosis and circular economy practices aligns closely with Washington's ambitions around sustainable manufacturing and resource efficiency. Following the Pacific Northwest Industrial Symbiosis Conference and engagement with Denmark's Ambassador to the United States, state leaders, businesses, ports, and sustainability organizations used a series of conversations to identify shared priorities and extensive commercial opportunities in areas such as energy systems, water management, sustainable aviation fuels, and industrial symbiosis. The ongoing conversations that followed helped deepen relationships, align priorities, and identify practical opportunities for future cooperation including a potential MOU.

Washington's experience illustrates that **the most valuable role for an international affairs office is as a convener and facilitator**. By surveying for interest, mapping stakeholders, identifying natural partners, and building buy-in before signature, the Office of International Affairs helps create agreements that rest on strong foundations and are more likely to generate sustained activity, survive political transitions, and deliver long-term value.

Annex: Meridian's snapshot on State-Level MOUs

How U.S. states are building their own international partnerships

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STATE-LED MOUs ANALYZED

Spanning 44 U.S. states and 25 foreign partner countries, signed between 2021 and 2026.

TOP PARTNER COUNTRIES

1	Taiwan		9
2	Canada		7
3	United Kingdom		7
4	South Korea		6
5	Germany		4

SECTOR PREVALENCE

Share of all 60 MOUs that touch each sector.

Most agreements span more than one sector, so shares add up to well over 100%

83%

Economic

72%

Tech & Innovation

32%

Climate

25%

Transportation

23%

Culture & Education

METHODOLOGY

Agreements were identified and compiled through desktop research into state government press releases, official agreement texts, and news coverage. The research sought to provide a snapshot: the dataset may undercount agreements that were signed but not publicly announced or documented in English-language sources. Research covered 01/2021 to 06/2026.

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