



MERIDIAN INTERNATIONAL CENTER'S

Open Diplomacy *Playbook*



A practical guide for the leaders already shaping American influence abroad—in boardrooms, labs, city halls, locker rooms, and kitchens—whether or not they've ever thought of themselves as diplomats.

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Introduction

Understanding the Open Diplomacy Playbook

The United States has never had more sources of diplomatic power operating in the world than it does today. Much of that power, however, remains underrecognized, uncoordinated, and not used to its full potential.

The institutions built to project American influence abroad—the State Department, the Foreign Service, and the U.S. embassy network—were designed for a world where governments primarily spoke to governments. Outcomes were shaped through treaties, aid packages, and formal negotiations. That architecture remains essential. But on its own, it is no longer enough.

The State Department recognized this reality early. Since 1940, exchange programs like the International Visitor Leadership Program have brought emerging foreign leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators into direct contact with American communities and institutions, showing that people-to-people engagement can build trust in ways formal diplomacy cannot.

What has changed is that this kind of engagement is no longer peripheral to diplomacy; it is central to how global influence is shaped, projected, and experienced.

Today, the leaders shaping American influence in the world are no longer just government diplomats. They are also the CEOs structuring foreign investment, scientists co-authoring research across borders, mayors negotiating directly with foreign counterparts on trade, and athletes and artists reaching audiences no embassy press release ever will. Yet most operate without a clear

understanding of how their decisions and relationships fit into a broader geopolitical landscape.

This Playbook is intended to help close that gap.

The Competitive Context

Three shifts make it more urgent for American leaders to understand the stakes of their international engagement:

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First, the competition has become more deliberate. Rival governments increasingly use companies, universities, cultural institutions, media platforms, and other non-state actors to advance national goals. China is the clearest example. Its Belt and Road Initiative is not just an infrastructure program but a strategy to expand economic influence, shape technical standards, deepen political relationships, and create strategic dependence in markets where American presence is often limited.
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Second, the infrastructure of influence has changed. Technical standards, investment flows, research partnerships, city-to-city agreements, and commercial platforms now shape international outcomes in ways once reserved for formal diplomacy.
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Third, the window for setting norms is closing. AI, digital trade, space, energy, and critical minerals will shape global competition for decades. The countries and institutions that help set those rules early will have an advantage. Those who arrive later will negotiate from behind.



Introduction

The United States possesses advantages uniquely suited to this new landscape. American influence is strongest when it is carried through independent institutions, open networks, and relationships built on trust rather than state direction.

But that advantage is frequently underleveraged. American companies, universities, cities, scientists, athletes, and cultural institutions possess extraordinary reach and legitimacy, yet often operate without sufficient strategic awareness or connection to one another. The challenge is not capability. It is coordination, context, and orientation.

What Is Open Diplomacy?

Open Diplomacy is a framework for helping leaders beyond government—across business, science, technology, sports, culture, and civic life—understand the diplomatic significance of their international engagement and connect them to the networks through which partnerships and influence are built.

It does not ask these leaders to act as representatives of the government. Their independence is what gives them credibility. But their decisions shape how the United States is perceived, trusted, and engaged around the world. Most are made without recognizing that they carry diplomatic significance at all. A company can invest in

local workforce development or simply extract value from a market.

A university can build a partnership around genuine collaboration, or structure it in ways that signal distrust. An athlete can engage with local communities or move through a country in a protected bubble.

Open Diplomacy starts from the assumption that global influence in the modern world is increasingly shaped by the billions of cumulative actions and decisions of independent actors operating across borders every day.

From Concept to Practice: Core Principles

This Playbook is designed to move Open Diplomacy from concept to action. It focuses on four areas where non-government actors are already shaping international outcomes at scale—business, science and technology, cities and states, and sports and culture.

Each section helps leaders identify where they have influence, how their choices are perceived abroad, and how to leverage existing relationships, platforms, and partnerships to build more durable international engagement. Across every sector, the same principles apply: act with intention, preserve credibility, coordinate where useful, and build relationships before they are needed:

Intentionality Over Presence

Operating internationally is not the same as engaging diplomatically. The difference is whether relationships are built to last, through local hiring, community investment, and genuine cultural understanding, or treated as short-term transactions.

Independence as a Strength

Non-state actors build trust because they are not delivering a government agenda. Their credibility depends on that independence. The moment a company or university starts to look like an extension of Washington, the asset degrades.

Introduction

Coordination Without Dependency

Embassy and consulate networks offer context, introductions, and alignment with U.S. interests. Most non-state actors underuse them. Draw on that support, but recognize that they are there, first and foremost, to support official government priorities.

Relationships Built Before They Are Needed

Crisis response is a lagging indicator of relationship quality. Organizations with deep local roots adapt fastest in a crisis. Those roots are built over years, not in response to an emergency.

The Work Is Already Diplomatic

International engagement always carries foreign policy implications. The question is whether decision-makers recognize that weight. Greater awareness can change choices at the margins, and those margins, across millions of actors and decisions, are where American influence is actually won or lost.

Meridian's Vantage Point

This Playbook draws on Meridian International Center's 65-year track record at the intersection of official diplomacy and broader American engagement—convening diplomats, the private sector, and civic leaders, and building networks that connect U.S. institutions with counterparts abroad.

The insights come from leaders Meridian works with every day: CEOs, governors, ambassadors, scientists, athletes, and cultural leaders navigating international engagement in real time. Their experience shows what builds trust, what erodes it, and how influence moves across institutions, markets, and societies.

The Playbook turns those lessons into practical guidance for a wider set of leaders, helping them recognize the diplomatic significance of their work and engage the world with greater intention. The future of American influence will depend less on what governments say alone and more on how American institutions, companies, cities, universities, creators, and networks engage the world.

Meridian is built for that reality: a platform connecting these actors to one another, to the diplomatic community, and to the global relationships that shape trust, partnership, and influence.



The Corporate Sector

Building Bridges Through Business

Companies and leaders at the forefront who understand their role at the intersection of business and diplomacy don't just survive geopolitical turbulence; they turn it into a competitive advantage.

This intersection isn't new—U.S. businesses have been shaping American foreign policy since the early 1800s, from securing trade routes and shipping rights to expanding market access. From the Louisiana Purchase to the Marshall Plan, commercial interests have long influenced diplomatic strategy. What is new is the unprecedented scope and speed of today's geopolitical developments. Nearly every country and trading bloc can generate instability, and virtually every industry now faces geopolitical pressures—forcing companies across all sectors to navigate diplomatic complexities that once affected only a handful of industries.

Governments have more power to impact your business than your competitors do, especially in overseas markets. That's why an international strategy requires a deep understanding of how to leverage diplomatic networks. In today's interconnected world, policy impacts ripple across borders, and every major business decision carries diplomatic weight, just as every diplomatic challenge creates business implications.

The key isn't whether a business leader engages in diplomacy, but whether they do so consciously, strategically, and with purpose.

Context and Metrics

American companies represent one of the nation's most significant international presences. Understanding the scale of their global presence illuminates why corporate leaders are—and have the potential to be—diplomatic actors. These numbers tell a story: American corporations operate at a scale and in places where traditional diplomatic infrastructure cannot always reach. This presence creates both responsibility and opportunity.

\$7.14 trillion in U.S. foreign direct investment abroad at the end of 2025, representing a \$438.1 billion increase from 2024 and demonstrating the expanding global footprint of American business

\$5.86 trillion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the United States at the end of 2025, supporting millions of American jobs through the operations of foreign multinationals

99% of S&P 500 companies publishing sustainability reports in 2024, up from just 20% in 2011

Forces Reshaping Corporate Diplomacy

Crisis as the New Normal: The pandemic didn't just disrupt supply chains—it revealed how corporate operational continuity often depends on whether diplomatic objectives succeed or fail. When traditional multilateral frameworks collapsed and countries imposed unilateral border controls, airlines like United had to develop direct diplomatic relationships with foreign governments just to maintain basic connectivity.

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Financial institutions maintaining operations in conflict zones became essential infrastructure for humanitarian response.

Technology Transfer as Trust-Building: Today, technology leadership can determine geopolitical influence, and how American companies share innovation matters as much as what they invent. Boeing's 90-year partnership with Brazil includes 30 patent applications filed in-country, \$5 million in STEM education reaching five million students, and partnerships with universities to develop sustainable aviation fuel. This comprehensive approach creates relationships that transcend buyer-seller dynamics.

Companies that view international operations as merely transactional often struggle with local regulations, are exposed to political and geopolitical shifts, and miss out on opportunities seized by competitors with stronger networks. Meanwhile, companies that invest in their diplomatic capabilities—cultural competency, long-term stakeholder relationships, crisis coordination with embassies—create sustainable competitive advantages that financial resources alone cannot replicate.

Case Studies

The examples show that corporate diplomacy is not a soft add-on to business strategy; it is often the mechanism that makes global business possible. Companies that understand this do more than adapt to international pressure—they build the relationships, credibility, and operational resilience that allow them to shape outcomes in their favor. The case studies that follow illustrate how leading firms turn that insight into action, using long-term partnership, crisis management, and local trust as core parts of their international strategy.

Boeing: Innovation as Global Trust-Building

Boeing's partnerships across Latin America demonstrate how strategic investment in local talent and technology creates goodwill while advancing American aerospace leadership. With over 700 commercial jets in service across the region and projected demand for 2,365 new aircraft over the next 20 years, Boeing has positioned itself as an essential partner in regional aviation development.

The company's approach extends beyond aircraft sales to comprehensive ecosystem building. Boeing has secured more than 30 invention disclosures and patent applications since establishing operations in Brazil in 2012, while investing over \$5 million in STEM education partnerships that have impacted five million students. Recent agreements with Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia's commitment to purchase 30 aircraft with options for 30 more and Vietnam Airlines' \$8 billion order for 50 Boeing aircraft, demonstrate how commercial success reinforces diplomatic relationships.

What made this successful: Boeing's strategy combines technology transfer with workforce development, creating shared value that transcends traditional buyer-seller relationships. The company partners with local universities, invests in sustainable aviation fuel development, and works directly with national aviation agencies on safety projects. This approach has enabled Boeing to navigate complex geopolitical environments while maintaining strong relationships across diverse markets.

Citi: Financial Diplomacy at Scale

Citi's response during the Ukraine crisis exemplifies how private sector continuity can support broader diplomatic objectives when traditional channels face constraints. As the only American bank operating on the ground when war broke out, Citi's decision to maintain operations became a diplomatic act that ensured financial system stability for international companies and humanitarian organizations.

The bank's global infrastructure enables unique diplomatic support through programs like the \$2 billion sustainable supply chain finance initiative with the International Finance Corporation, specifically targeting emerging markets. Citi's work extends to financial inclusion efforts, including \$100 million in financing to PayJoy to increase digital connectivity for underserved populations in Mexico.

What made this successful: Citi leveraged its existing global network and crisis management capabilities to provide continuity when government-to-government channels were disrupted. The bank's established relationships with NGOs, charities, and international organizations enabled rapid coordination of humanitarian responses. By maintaining operational presence during crisis, Citi demonstrated American private sector resilience while facilitating critical financial flows.

United Airlines: Connectivity as Crisis Management Through Aviation Diplomacy

United Airlines' response to the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies how modern aviation companies must engage in sophisticated diplomatic relationships when traditional international frameworks prove insufficient. As the pandemic fractured multilateral coordination mechanisms and forced countries to adopt unilateral border policies, United's strategic approach to diplomatic relationship-building became essential to maintaining global connectivity.

Key to United's success was its investment in diplomatic engagement and social capital before the crisis hit, which allowed swift adaptation when quick consensus or country-by-country negotiation was needed. By establishing direct government contacts and prioritizing transparent communication, including technology platforms for pandemic-era travel requirements, United maintained international connectivity and supported passenger and cargo movement while many airlines struggled with regulatory obstacles.

What made this successful: United's pre-existing network of diplomatic relationships, reputation for results-driven engagement, and willingness to engage government stakeholders directly gave it the agility and credibility needed in crisis. Rather than relying solely on the U.S. government, United handled critical international negotiations itself, demonstrating how private sector actors, through proactive relationship-building, can play a decisive role in global crisis management and economic recovery.

Best Practices

What these examples make clear is that the most effective corporate diplomats do not treat international engagement as a series of isolated transactions. They invest in the connective tissue of global business so that their companies can operate across borders with greater confidence and legitimacy. The best practices below translate those lessons into a practical framework:

Strategic Alignment: Successful corporate diplomacy aligns business objectives with governments’ strategic priorities in global issues like technology leadership and workforce development. Companies that frame their international activities within these broader themes gain both market advantages and diplomatic support.

Local Partnership Development: It is wise to build genuine partnerships that combine business objectives with community benefits. Boeing’s university collaborations and Citi’s financial inclusion programs demonstrate how shared value creation strengthens long-term relationships beyond transactional exchanges.

Cultural Competency Investment: Deep cultural understanding proves more valuable than language skills alone. Companies that invest in local leadership development, maintain long-term presence, and adapt business practices to local contexts achieve superior outcomes and stronger diplomatic relationships.

Crisis Response Capabilities: Developing protocols that enable operational continuity during geopolitical disruptions is valuable. Companies with established crisis management frameworks and diplomatic relationships can maintain business continuity while supporting broader American interests during international tensions.

Metrics and Transparency: Maintaining clear metrics for impact measurement, including total amount invested, jobs created, training programs launched, and infrastructure developed, is worth the time and energy. Transparent reporting builds credibility with both business stakeholders and diplomatic partners.

Embassy Integration Points

Corporate diplomacy is strongest when companies recognize that they do not have to navigate global complexity alone. U.S. embassies, especially commercial and economic sections, can help firms identify opportunities, understand risk, and build the relationships that make overseas engagement more durable. The guidance below outlines where businesses and embassy teams can most effectively work together to turn commercial presence into diplomatic advantage.

What Commercial Sections Provide:

Market Intelligence: Commercial officers provide sector-specific insights, competitive analysis, and regulatory guidance that are difficult to access independently. They maintain relationships with local government agencies, business associations, and potential partners that can accelerate market entry and expansion.

Matchmaking: Embassies identify potential importers, distributors, agents, and joint venture partners based on company needs. They facilitate introductions and provide credibility through association with the U.S. diplomatic presence.

Advocacy: When American companies face discriminatory treatment, regulatory barriers, or unfair competition from state-supported enterprises, the embassy advocates for level playing fields through diplomatic channels. This advocacy proves particularly valuable in markets where local competitors receive preferential treatment.

Trade Mission Support: Embassies organize sector-specific trade missions, provide venues for meetings, and convene local stakeholders. These structured programs showcase American companies and products while building networks that extend beyond individual events.

How Embassy Partnerships Work Best

Proactive Information Sharing: Leading companies brief embassy teams regularly on operations, market observations, and competitive dynamics. Companies

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gain insider knowledge about regulatory changes and market conditions; embassies understand private sector activities and challenges. This two-way flow creates mutual value.

Long-Term Engagement: Relationships built over years prove most valuable during crisis. Companies contacting embassies only when facing problems may find less responsive support than those with established relationships. Consistent engagement—through regular briefings, participation in embassy events, and information sharing—builds trust that pays dividends when challenges arise.

Mutual Respect for Constraints: Companies have fiduciary responsibilities limiting purely diplomatic activities; embassies must balance multiple priorities and cannot serve as corporate service providers. Understanding these constraints enables realistic expectations and productive collaboration. The most effective partnerships recognize what each party can and cannot deliver.

Challenges and Risk Mitigation

The Do’s:

- Prioritize transparency in overseas partnerships and maintain consistent communication with embassy commercial teams.
- Invest in long-term relationship building and cultural competency rather than short-term transactional approaches.
- Develop crisis management protocols that coordinate with diplomatic channels while maintaining operational independence.
- Align international business strategies with broader American competitiveness objectives in key sectors.

The Don’ts:

- Don’t assume private capital can replace official development assistance or substitute for government-to-government policy engagement. Corporate investment, while valuable, addresses different needs than traditional diplomatic programs.
- Don’t overextend brand-driven campaigns without long-term local investment. Surface-level corporate

- social responsibility initiatives without substantial commitment risk backlash and reputational damage.
- Don’t conflate corporate presence with diplomatic influence. Business success doesn’t automatically translate to political leverage, and companies must navigate carefully between commercial and political objectives.

The most effective corporate diplomacy recognizes these limitations while maximizing areas of comparative advantage—crisis response agility, global network access, operational resilience, innovation capacity, and long-term relationship building that transcends political cycles.

Capitalizing on the Corporate Diplomat

American companies bring capabilities that government actors cannot replicate: global operational networks reaching places that embassies do not; crisis-response agility enabling rapid decisions; innovation capacity driving technological leadership; long-term relationship-building transcending political cycles; and market credibility from commercial success.

These capabilities become diplomatic assets when aligned with broader interests, but only when realistic expectations are set for appropriate roles, sustainable commitments, and boundaries between commercial and political objectives. Understanding the role of a corporate diplomat means recognizing that well-executed business activities often have a stronger impact than programs designed primarily for diplomatic purposes.

The architecture of modern diplomacy increasingly runs through corporate relationships, investment decisions, and operational choices. These decisions shape how millions worldwide experience American values, innovation, and commitment. Making this work requires operating at the intersection of business excellence and diplomatic awareness, where commercial success and diplomatic progress reinforce rather than compromise each other.



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Architects of Global Standards and Trust

Technology and science leaders have found themselves at the center of geopolitics. In recent years, artificial intelligence, space exploration, biotech breakthroughs, and quantum computing have come to determine global competitiveness. American scientists and technologists don't define law, but they often set the technical norms and practices that travel globally—shaping economic competition and societal risk management in ways traditional diplomacy alone cannot.

Their research, standards, and domain expertise are diplomatic assets in a world in which information is currency. When scientists publish, collaborate internationally, set technical standards, create products, and advise governments, they advance knowledge while representing the United States' values of openness, innovation, and transparency.

Technology and science leaders extend beyond traditional business and academic roles; they're potential force multipliers for American interests when governments partner effectively with them. For example, 60% of Nigeria's startups are funded by the United States, and about 80% are formally incorporated in the U.S., paying American taxes and extending influence abroad even if founders don't identify as American. Tech giants like Google and Meta function as modern equivalents to NASA, building global trust in the U.S. brand through innovative products. Including science and technology experts and private sector practitioners early, because they hold practical knowledge, leads to more informed policy discussions and deliberations.

The global engagement of America's scientists and technologists will determine whether American innovation spreads openly worldwide or whether others write the rules.

Much is at stake here—nations like China seek to spread their technological tools and ideas, and in doing so, grow their influence and their ability to shape the international standards that will govern global technologies. In an age where technology is more intertwined than ever with all aspects of life, the effort to preserve individual freedoms and extend democratic values depends upon smart technology policies crafted by knowledgeable decision-makers. America's diplomatic successes extend its innovation and technological ecosystems by engendering trust in American research and products.

Context and Metrics

American technology and scientific innovation remain globally dominant, but maintaining this leadership depends on continuous international engagement and collaboration. Understanding the scale of this presence explains how scientists, technologists, and researchers alike have become essential diplomatic actors. Taken together, these figures tell a consistent story: the United States leads the world not just in the scale of its scientific and technological output, but in its ability to shape the norms, standards, and governance frameworks that

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determine how that output is used globally. American researchers generate a disproportionate share of the world’s highest-impact scientific work; American companies attract the majority of global venture capital into transformative technologies; and American-led initiatives—from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) AI Principles to the Artemis Accords—have set the foundational rules for emerging technology domains. That leadership is not self-sustaining. It requires continuous international engagement, investment in the people who connect science to policy, and a recognition that universities, research institutions, and academic communities are as much a part of America’s diplomatic toolkit as its corporations and government agencies.

\$940 billion U.S. firms’ total R&D investment (2023), representing nearly 43% of all spending by the world’s top 2,000 R&D investors. As of 2024, nine of the world’s top 15 R&D spenders are U.S.-based.

46+ countries have adopted the OECD AI Principles—the first intergovernmental standard on artificial intelligence—which shaped G20 and European regulatory approaches. Over 930 policy initiatives across 70+ jurisdictions now follow these principles.

35% of world scientific and engineering articles with international co-authors include a U.S. author; U.S. publications with international collaboration increased from 19% in 2000 to 40% in 2020.

Forces Reshaping Science & Tech Diplomacy Government Dependency on Industry Expertise:

Governments worldwide lack the technical sophistication to regulate emerging technologies effectively without industry input. The U.S. exemplifies this through Department of Defense software factories embedding commercial technologists, such as Kessel Run (a U.S. Air Force software factory whose founding was catalyzed

by former Google CEO Eric Schmidt), Space Force’s Kobayashi Maru, the U.S. Army Software Factory, the U.S. Navy’s Project Overmatch, and the DevSecOps Platform, Platform One. This model—unique to the U.S. but envied globally—borrows agile practices to rapidly create, adapt, and adopt military technology at commercial speed.

G7 Hiroshima Process and Expert Input: Nations worldwide increasingly rely on industry expertise for AI governance. The G7’s Hiroshima Process exemplifies this—advanced AI organizations collaborated with governments and academics through multi-stakeholder consultations to establish generative AI principles in seven months, far outpacing traditional diplomatic timelines.

APEC Privacy Framework Leadership: U.S. companies shaped cross-border data flow across 21 Asia-Pacific economies through the APEC Privacy Framework, balancing innovation with privacy protections. This became the foundation for Asia-Pacific digital trade, demonstrating how private-sector input creates practical frameworks that governments cannot develop alone.

Localization as Trust-Building: Tech companies’ decisions to invest in local languages, cultural features, and community engagement are increasingly read as signals about American values and respect. Localizing an app into a new language can cost upwards of \$50,000, with costs varying depending on the level of localization, from the number of words to be translated to the level of editing. For billion-dollar platforms, this cost may be negligible, and still extremely worthwhile. When Meta created Nowruz stickers for Persian-language Instagram users, it was perceived across the Persian-speaking diaspora as official American recognition of Persian culture.

Strategic Competition Through Technology Standards: The rules governing AI development, data flows, cybersecurity protocols, and digital infrastructure determine which countries maintain technological

leadership. Whether China or the U.S. shapes these standards will determine the geopolitical balance of power for decades. Scientists from outside of government—both from academia and the private sector—are finding themselves on the inside of this competition as they work with government to ensure that their preferred views are put forward.

- Consider the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee:** An agency-led technical forum where national space agencies, including NASA, coordinate research and develop shared debris-mitigation practices. U.S. companies contribute operational data, engineering experience, and risk insights through partnerships with U.S. regulators and space agencies, even though they are not formal members of the body itself. Those expert-driven outputs are then reflected in U.S.-guided standards and best practices that other countries commonly adopt, shaping de facto global norms for orbital safety that diplomats alone could not design. This demonstrates U.S. leadership without a treaty and norm-setting through expertise rather than formal law.

Case Studies

OECD AI Principles: Governance at Digital Speed

In 2018, artificial intelligence was advancing faster than could be regulated by any government. Private companies like OpenAI, Google DeepMind, and Microsoft were defining the pace of progress, while governments struggled to understand or coordinate responses. This presented the risk of a patchwork regulatory landscape, with restrictive regimes in some regions and unregulated development in others.

To address this, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—historically known for economic policy rather than technology governance—quickly responded to convene governments, industry, and experts to create the world’s first intergovernmental AI framework in 2019. Through its Business and Industry Advisory Committee (BIAC), the OECD embedded technologists and business leaders directly into the standards-setting process. In less than six months, member states reached consensus on five guiding principles: human-centered values, inclusive growth, transparency, robustness, and accountability. This quick and rigorous response proved that global alignment was possible when technical expertise is built into the decision-making process.

By May 2023, over 1,000 policy initiatives in more than 70 jurisdictions referenced the OECD framework, and the G20 had formally adopted it. More recently, regulatory leadership consolidation among major technology economies has rendered the OECD principles less central to shaping new AI policy. For governments outside the G7 and AI Action Summit processes, however, the framework remains a vital reference point—especially for those seeking inclusive participation in global technology governance.

What made this successful: American technology leaders recognized that early, upstream engagement during policy formation is far more effective than downstream advocacy that seeks to modify established rules. By participating in the standard-setting process itself—not as lobbyists, but as experts

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bringing legitimate technical knowledge—they shaped outcomes that reflected both innovation interests and governance values. The OECD process also revealed an important structural tension: when governments lack in-house scientific and technical capacity, norm-setting risks becoming one-directional. Researchers and academics bring independent perspectives on safety, ethics, and long-term societal risk that commercial actors may underweight. Embedding STEM expert personnel within government—through programs such as the Jefferson Science Fellows program, which places academic scientists and engineers at the State Department, and the Embassy Science Fellows program, which deploys federal scientists to diplomatic posts overseas—helps ensure that government negotiators can independently assess technical claims, engage universities and research institutions as well as industry, and ask the questions that profit-driven actors may not raise.

The enduring legacy of the OECD AI Principles lies in the process, not the product. The OECD demonstrated that international decision-making can keep pace with digital transformation when it embeds technologists, accelerates deliberation, and treats cross-sector collaboration as a design principle rather than an afterthought. Even as newer frameworks, like the EU’s AI Act, face mixed reviews, the OECD model remains proof that agile, inclusive governance is achievable at a global scale.

NASA–Russia ISS Partnership: Science Transcends Politics

The Cold War formally ended in 1991, but the collapse of the Soviet Union left open fundamental questions about how the United States and Russia would redefine their relationship. One of the most consequential answers emerged in space. The Clinton administration recognized that competition in space risked a renewed arms race and that, ultimately, cooperation was the necessary approach for this extraterrestrial frontier. This cooperation required the creation of mechanisms to enable tens of thousands of American and Russian scientists, engineers, and technicians to work together daily, building trust at the technical level even when

diplomatic relations remained strained. This need for partnership led the U.S. to invite Russia to join the International Space Station (ISS) program.

The ISS project presented economic, financial, scientific, foreign policy, and national security risks, as NASA and the Russian Space Agency would have to embed teams in each other’s countries and manage an unprecedented degree of technical interdependence. Key station functions—from propulsion and attitude control to power, life support, and data networks—depended on hardware and software provided by multiple partners, making safe operations contingent on mutual confidence in each other’s engineering and procedures. The question was: Could this technical trust survive political turbulence?

Russian cosmonauts trained in Houston while American astronauts trained at Star City near Moscow. The partnership launched its first joint ISS module in 1998 and has maintained continuous human presence in orbit since 2000, an unprecedented feat of international cooperation. Over time, the ISS grew to include 15 nations, but the U.S.–Russia technical relationship remained its backbone.

What made this successful: The ISS model operated on the principles of genuine technical partnership rather than public-diplomacy theater. Both nations benefited from the arrangement. Russia received resources and technological engagement, while the U.S. gained Russian expertise. The partnership was sustainable because it served genuine interests on both sides. It also worked because the United States government provided the initial diplomatic opening and resources, but then got out of the way. Scientists and engineers, working on technical problems that were genuinely shared, built the trust that diplomacy alone couldn’t create.

As NASA expands its Artemis program and international lunar collaborations under the Artemis Accords, the ISS model remains a perennial template: when diplomacy is fragile, shared scientific missions can sustain engagement. The model also provides a clear lesson that durable international partnerships grow from genuine collaboration, not symbolic cooperation.

Best Practices

Effective science and technology diplomacy depends on mutual literacy. Scientists, engineers, and technical leaders must understand how their governments make decisions, and diplomats must recognize how expert collaboration can enable rigorous, timely governance. While the following practices are written for technical and policy partners alike, each can apply these lessons for more effective cooperation.

Educate Government Partners: Technological and scientific advancement moves faster than most governments can understand or regulate. Companies and academic institutions should prioritize educating policymakers on technical realities, e.g., what’s possible, what’s not, and what specific regulatory choices mean in practice. For universities and research institutions, this role is especially important: academic scientists can engage policymakers as neutral experts, translating peer-reviewed research and emerging evidence into policy-relevant insights without the perceived commercial incentives that often accompany corporate engagement. Direct, jargon-free engagement with both policy and technical officials builds trust and helps shape smarter, more adaptive regulation. Universities that treat policy engagement as a core part of their public service mission—through briefings, advisory roles, fellowships, and testimony—can meaningfully improve governments’ technical literacy before regulatory positions harden.

Prioritize Localization: Localization accomplishes multiple objectives. It demonstrates respect for local cultures, building goodwill that extends beyond the company to shape perceptions of American values. It makes products more usable, expanding market reach while demonstrating a commitment to reach local communities rather than simply extracting revenue.

Engage in Upstream Policy Formation: By the time legislation or regulation reaches final drafting, the opportunity to shape outcomes has largely passed. The most effective policy engagement occurs upstream, during conceptual conversations about which problems

need solving and which approaches might work. Similarly, identify key venues for policy formation, like multilateral technical bodies, bilateral dialogues, regulatory agency early-stage consultations, and Congressional committee staff briefings before hearings. As the expert, being available as a resource at the outset of these conversations enables deeper policy discussions and more effectively amplifies impact.

Build for User Experience (Including Government Users): Applying design thinking to government relations can help clarify what information officials need to make informed, politically viable decisions. By simplifying technical language, anticipating policy concerns, and providing clear examples and written materials that they can use internally, experts can help to meet governments where they are and enhance mutual understanding and trust.

Maintain Humility About Technology’s Role: Technology can solve many problems, but should not be considered a fix-all. Some challenges are fundamentally social, cultural, or political rather than technical. Recognizing these boundaries and acknowledging the limitations of technology builds credibility that can be destroyed by overclaiming.

Embed Scientists and Technologists Directly in Foreign Policy Processes: Making technical expertise available to policymakers is not enough—scientists, engineers, and academic researchers must be present at the table when consequential decisions are made, including on issues not obviously labeled as STEM topics. A sanctions discussion, a trade negotiation, or a bilateral security dialogue can all turn on technical details that only a practitioner would recognize in real time. As Schmitt et al. (2021) have argued, having scientists “in the room” for traditionally non-STEM deliberations should become standard practice rather than an occasional bonus. For example, a sectoral sanctions policy aimed at a strategic competitor may be far better calibrated—achieving the intended economic impact while limiting diplomatic blowback—if a technologist at the table can identify

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which specific components or processes to target rather than imposing a blunt sector-wide restriction.

Embassy Integration Points

U.S. embassies provide infrastructure that enables technology diplomacy, yet many companies underutilize these resources due to unfamiliarity with what embassies offer or the assumption that embassy support serves only large multinationals.

What Digital Attachés and Commercial Sections Provide:

Technical Market Intelligence: Digital attachés are embedded in U.S. embassies worldwide and specialize in promoting commercial exchange, tackling market access barriers, and developing partnerships across technology sectors. They maintain relationships with local regulatory agencies, industry associations, and technology communities that provide advance warning of policy changes affecting American companies.

Regulatory Navigation Support: When technology companies face discriminatory treatment, data localization requirements, or regulatory barriers, embassy commercial teams engage directly with host government officials. This advocacy works particularly well when multiple American companies face similar barriers, allowing embassies to present unified concerns from the business community.

Organizing Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues with Convening Power: U.S. embassies possess the unique power to convene government, business, and civil society around technology and innovation policy. Through their commercial and economic sections, embassies facilitate introductions, share market insights, and host stakeholder dialogues aligned with U.S. diplomatic priorities. Coordinating with American Chambers of Commerce and industry peers amplifies advocacy efforts and strengthens collective credibility. Embassy-organized technology forums frequently unite government officials, American companies, local startups, universities, and civil society organizations—

creating channels for collaboration and policy discussion that rarely emerge through individual company engagement.

Academic and Research Network Engagement: In addition to commercial outreach, embassies can help connect U.S. universities and research institutions with local academic partners, ministries, and scientific bodies. These engagements support evidence based policymaking, open research norms, and long-term relationship building that often precedes formal regulation or market entry.

Bilateral Technology Initiatives: U.S. embassies advance alignment on digital economy issues through active frameworks like the U.S.-Japan Technology Prosperity Deal, which coordinates policy on semiconductors, AI governance, and quantum computing, and the U.S.-India TRUST Initiative, focusing on quantum computing, telecommunications, defense technology, and AI safety. Science and technology leaders who participate in these structured dialogues gain direct access to policy formation while advancing broader U.S. diplomatic objectives.

How Embassy Partnerships Work Best

Proactive Relationship Building: Contact embassies proactively rather than reactively; that is, before entering new markets rather than after encountering problems. Brief commercial teams on your technology, plans for market entry, and regulatory concerns that you anticipate. This early engagement enables embassies to provide better support when challenges emerge.

Sustained Presence Rather Than Episodic Engagement: Participate consistently in embassy technology initiatives rather than appearing only for high-profile events. Regular engagement builds relationships that prove most valuable during crises.

Information Sharing That Benefits Embassy Understanding: Technology companies operating in-country possess ground-truth knowledge about

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regulatory enforcement, competitive dynamics, and market conditions that enhance embassy reporting. Sharing this intelligence helps embassies better understand markets while building reciprocal relationships in which embassies share policy intelligence with companies.

Coordination Through Industry Associations: American Chambers of Commerce and technology industry associations provide structures for coordinating engagement. Rather than each company requesting embassy support separately, coordinated industry positions enable more effective advocacy.

Challenges and Risk Mitigation

The Do's:

- Build genuine collaborative relationships where both parties benefit.
- Participate early in policy formation when frameworks are malleable.
- Present technical expertise grounded in evidence. Acknowledge technological limitations and legitimate concerns, not just benefits.
- Build relationships with local startups, universities, and civil society, not just government and corporations. This creates ecosystems that reflect American values of open innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Invest in long-term commitment with sustained engagement.

The Don'ts:

- Don't assume what markets need based on data available at headquarters. Local context often differs from central expectations. What works in one market may not work in another due to differences in infrastructure, cultural factors, or regulatory environments. Effective engagement begins with listening to local stakeholders explain their needs and constraints.
- Don't expect tech to replace development assistance. Corporate technology investment serves commercial interests. Development assistance

targets market failures and public goods that profit-seeking companies won't address.

- Don't isolate company engagement from government coordination. Tech companies that operate without government awareness or coordination risk undermining diplomatic objectives. Embassies need to understand what tech companies are doing locally so that diplomacy and business strategy can be coordinated.
- Don't expect democratic processes to adopt your policy position. When governments deliberate on tech policy, they may choose approaches you disagree with. Respecting democratic processes and continuing to engage—regardless of the desired outcomes—is essential to maintaining long-term credibility and influence.

When Expertise Becomes Diplomacy

The most effective science and tech diplomacy happens when technical experts engage authentically in international conversations grounded in genuine expertise and honesty about both opportunities and limitations. This is fundamentally different from advocacy or lobbying. It is the recognition that in a world shaped by rapid technological change, nations can't govern effectively without understanding technical realities, and companies can't operate sustainably without understanding the policy landscape.

The work of scientists and technology experts has always been global. The choice isn't whether to engage internationally, but how to engage internationally—by strategically helping governments understand technologies, participating in standard-setting forums, and building relationships that strengthen American innovation leadership.

The role of diplomats and government officials is to companies and technical experts them see that excellent business practices, like localization, genuine partnerships, and ethical technology, inherently advance American interests and values. The best outcomes happen when business strategy and diplomatic goals align naturally.



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Cities and States as Diplomatic Actors

For decades, diplomatic practice assumed a simple hierarchy: national governments negotiated with other national governments, while U.S. cities and states managed local affairs within their jurisdiction. That world no longer exists. Today’s existential challenges cross international borders and state lines and demand solutions that start locally. American mayors and governors no longer wait for Washington to advance their interests globally. They are building direct relationships with international counterparts, cultivating trade and investment deals, and shaping global policy outcomes in ways that complement—and sometimes bypass—traditional diplomacy.

A city or state’s international strategy is increasingly becoming a central component of its governance mission, shaping local prosperity and influencing how the United States is perceived abroad. While diplomatic authority has traditionally rested with national governments, the expanding role of state and local leaders in global policymaking reflects a broadening of who is regarded as a credible diplomatic stakeholder. Within multilateral forums, this legitimacy is increasingly acknowledged by international institutions and development agencies. A July 2025 report by the United Nations Secretary-General reaffirms the need for a stronger role of local and regional governments as they are indispensable partners in implementing global agendas. Subnational leaders epitomize America’s most authentic voice abroad—representing local communities that are solving everyday problems. The federal diplomat’s playbook must now include guidance on supporting, coordinating with, and leveraging subnational diplomacy.

The benefits of international engagement increasingly flow through local channels.

When a city secures foreign investment, it’s not an abstract trade statistic; it’s jobs in a community. When a state leads a trade mission, it opens markets for local businesses.

These aren’t just economic development activities, but diplomatic acts with foreign policy implications. As subnational leaders recognize and leverage their role as diplomatic actors, they can navigate the international landscape more effectively and deliver results for their constituents.

Context and Metrics

American cities and states have become significant diplomatic actors, driving international trade, foreign direct investment, and policy influence that rival those of some national governments. While the scale and momentum of subnational engagement have grown dramatically over the past two decades, this has been particularly true since the 2020 pandemic.

\$151 billion in foreign direct investment flowed into the U.S. in 2024 as foreign firms acquired, established, or expanded U.S. businesses. Those

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projects were associated with approximately 204,200 jobs at newly acquired, established, or expanded foreign-owned enterprises that year, with total planned employment rising above 213,000 when fully operational. While federal frameworks govern international trade, implementing these investments—particularly greenfield projects and facility expansions—often requires intensive scoping and negotiation by state economic development offices and regional chambers of commerce. Investments from allied nations like South Korea and Taiwan have been particularly strategic; for example, SK hynix committed approximately \$3.87 billion to build an advanced semiconductor packaging facility in Indiana, strengthening supply chain resilience and reducing reliance on geographically vulnerable regions for critical technologies.

166 cities engage in more than 1,600 unique international engagements. Cities prioritize economic development (45%), cultural and educational programs (43%), and climate sustainability (14%) through Sister Cities (54%), sector partnerships (7%), city networks (9%), foreign delegations (11%), and trade missions (15%).

84% of cities now have dedicated offices for international relations, with training for diplomatic staff surging from 19% in 2018 to 57% in 2024. U.S. cities are following this trajectory, but often with leaner structures. A 2024 survey from the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the Truman Center found that while 60% of surveyed U.S. cities now have staff managing international affairs, fewer than 20% have a dedicated director or manager for these portfolios. Despite these resource constraints, American cities are increasing their global footprint. In California, the share of major cities with official representatives for international affairs grew from 33% in 2010 to 77% in 2024.

Forces Reshaping Subnational Diplomacy

Trade and Investment Happen Below the National

Level: State and city governments can effectively court foreign investors, structuring incentive packages and closing deals. When Emirates Global Aluminum announced a \$4 billion aluminum refinery investment in Oklahoma, it was the result of a multi-year relationship cultivated by Governor Kevin Stitt, the Governor’s Washington, DC Office, and the state’s commerce team, not a single federal agreement. That project is expected to create “1,000 direct jobs, 1,800 indirect jobs and enhance Oklahoma’s ability to significantly grow its base of additional manufacturing jobs,” according to the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, illustrating how subnational diplomacy translates global capital flows into local tax revenue, employment, and supply-chain activity. As the first aluminum smelter built in America in almost 50 years, it also aligned with national supply chain security priorities.

State and Local Leaders Now Find Economic and Geopolitical Security Issues at Their Doorstep:

From navigating relationships with PRC-linked actors to developing a supply chain for critical inputs such as magnets and rare earths to countering foreign malign influence, state and local leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to ensure success.

State and Local Leaders Tackle Global Challenges:

Issues like pandemic response and migration are fundamentally urban challenges. For example, in April 2020, the C40 Cities launched the Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force to mitigate the economic harms caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eleven mayors—including the mayor of New Orleans, Louisiana, and the mayor of Seattle, Washington—joined forces with nine other mayors from across the globe to advance economic recovery and improve public health.

People Trust Local Leaders on Economic Impact: While the federal government leads on national security, Americans consistently report higher levels of trust in

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local government to address issues that affect their daily lives. According to Gallup, 67% of Americans trust local officials to handle problems within their community—a level of confidence that exceeds trust in federal institutions. This “proximity” trust allows local leaders to

bridge the gap between global policy and local benefit, ensuring that international engagements are tailored to the specific economic needs and public health priorities of their constituents.

Case Studies

The examples show that cities and states are no longer passive beneficiaries of foreign policy—they are active diplomatic actors with their own networks, priorities, and leverage. When local leaders align international engagement with economic development, resilience, and community needs, they can shape outcomes that matter far beyond their borders. The case studies that follow show how subnational leaders use trade, investment, and people-to-people ties to turn local priorities into global relationships.

California’s Strategic Investment Diplomacy with Asia

California’s economy—the fourth-largest in the world, reaching a GDP of \$4.1 trillion in 2024—depends on international markets and foreign investment. Yet California’s foreign engagement operated in a fragmented fashion: individual cities recruiting investors, companies negotiating trade deals, and nonprofit organizations facilitating exchanges. There was no coordinated strategy linking California’s innovation ecosystem, investment capacity, and policy priorities into a coherent diplomatic approach toward key international partners.

Japanese companies, in particular, had deep California operations but lacked an integrated government strategy to deepen relationships. The question became: how could California coordinate across its innovation leaders, government, and communities to position itself as Japan’s primary U.S. investment and innovation partner? California developed an integrated foreign direct investment strategy targeting Japan as a primary market, including a 2022 Memorandum of Cooperation with the Government of Japan to bolster economic and trade ties, and established a dedicated Trade and Services Desk in Tokyo in 2023. The state also integrated university partnerships and regional port agreements to create investment pathways for Japanese companies.

By 2024, Japanese companies were the second-largest foreign investor in California after the UK, with 3,280 foreign-owned enterprises generating nearly \$12.3 billion in wages. California’s coordinated approach transformed its relationship with Japan—rather than

viewing California as one U.S. state among many competing for investment, Japanese policymakers now treat engagement with California as equivalent to bilateral relationships with national governments.

What made this successful: California’s approach worked because it coordinated economic development strategy with diplomatic relationship-building. When Japanese companies considered investing in California, they joined an ecosystem that included government partnership, research collaboration, and long-term strategic alignment.

Great Lakes–Canada Border Coordination

The Great Lakes region—encompassing Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio—shares borders with Canadian provinces across one of the world’s most important trade corridors, and sees more than \$278 billion in annual bilateral trade. For decades, trade coordination along the border was supported by regional chambers of commerce, business groups, and city and state alliances. Post-2020 supply chain disruptions and environmental crises demonstrated that regional problems required direct engagement with Canadian provinces.

Regional leaders created binding agreements (memorandums of understanding) on trade, environmental management, and emergency response that operated independently but in coordination with national frameworks. Michigan established direct trade relationships with Ontario to bolster investment and create jobs in priority sectors like electric vehicles and supply chains; Wisconsin with Manitoba to collaborate in biosciences, agriculture, research and development, and transportation; and Illinois with Quebec, particularly in automobiles and parts and critical minerals. These weren’t informal exchanges, but formalized governmental relationships with regular briefings and coordinated trade missions.

At the municipal level, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative provides a parallel platform for more than 400 mayors and local officials to coordinate on water quality, climate resilience, and sustainable

economic development, aligning city-level priorities with state–province and federal agreements. Through joint declarations, shared best practices, and advocacy, the Cities Initiative helps translate high-level commitments—such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and new federal–provincial investments in restoration—into local implementation and cross-border collaboration.

Great Lakes trade by 2024 has a combined trade dollar value of \$312.9 billion, accounting for 15.2% of total U.S. exports, with state-province coordination as a key factor in growth. Great Lakes coordination created a model for subnational border engagement that other regions, such as Texas-Mexico and the Southwest states-Mexico, adopted.

What made this successful: Regional leaders recognized shared interests that transcended national boundaries. Trade, environmental quality, and supply chain resilience were issues where both sides benefited from coordination. The approach also succeeded because Great Lakes leaders operated within federal frameworks while creating subnational structures. They weren’t circumventing federal authority; they were exercising delegated authority in areas where the federal government had explicitly authorized state-level action. Furthermore, these states strategically leveraged federal resources where local capacity was insufficient. Much like successful trade missions in other cities, Great Lakes leaders often worked hand-in-hand with the U.S. Commercial Service to vet international partners and navigate customs regulations. However, they acted autonomously when national priorities were too broad or slow to address local needs. By driving their own agendas while using federal offices as a “force multiplier,” regional leaders ensured that cross-border coordination remained focused on regional economic survival rather than shifting national political cycles.

Sister Cities as Trade and Innovation Platforms

In 1956, President Eisenhower established the Sister Cities program to build peace through people-to-people connections. The program succeeded in building cultural understanding, educational exchanges, and long-term partnerships across borders. But after several decades,

many sister city relationships remained primarily cultural and educational, while expectations shifted to also focus on economic development or trade.

Sister City relationships, built on genuine bi-national community connections, increasingly became platforms to expand trade, investment, and innovation in ways that complemented their cultural and educational origins. Cities began to ask how long-standing people-to-people ties could accelerate commercial partnerships and economic opportunity while preserving the trust and reciprocity that made these relationships valuable in the first place.

Leading cities began intentionally connecting Sister City relationships to business development and innovation opportunities:

- Philadelphia and sister cities: Philadelphia formalized partnerships with its sister cities (including Toruń, Poland; Douala, Cameroon; and others) to facilitate business delegations, professional development exchanges, and trade relationship building. When delegations from sister cities visited Philadelphia, the city coordinated meetings not just with cultural organizations but with business leaders and innovation centers.
- San Francisco and Shanghai: San Francisco’s sister city relationship with Shanghai, established in 1979, evolved to facilitate technology partnerships, financial services agreements, and business-to-business connections, understanding the sister city relationship as a legitimate pathway for commercial engagement.
- Austin and international innovation hubs: Austin leveraged Sister City relationships with cities like Guadalajara and Saltillo in Mexico, and others, to create innovation ecosystem connections. Startups and tech companies from sister cities were facilitated into Austin’s venture ecosystem through sister city relationships.

Sister City relationships have progressively driven measurable trade and investment flows. In 2016, Fort Worth, Texas, and its eight sister cities saw \$14 million in direct and indirect economic impact, and network-wide, Sister Cities International-related exchanges generated an estimated \$525 million for the U.S. economy.

What made this successful: Sister City partnerships can work as diplomatic platforms because they can provide a foundation for long-term, relationship-driven engagement. Unlike formal government negotiations, these ties grow through civic and community exchanges that build the prerequisite trust for economic cooperation. However, the evolution from cultural connection to commercial impact is not automatic; it requires local leaders to actively layer an economic and policy strategy onto the existing relationship. While many of the 2,100-plus global municipal partnerships remain purely cultural or become dormant when leadership changes, those that succeed do so by institutionalizing ties within business and educational ecosystems. This ensures the partnership survives individual personnel shifts and serves as a vetted pathway for international engagement.

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Best Practices

Taken together, these examples show that successful subnational diplomacy is rarely accidental. It depends on clear goals, institutional structure, and a willingness to connect global relationships to concrete local outcomes like jobs, investment, and resilience. The best practices below build on those lessons and offer a framework for mayors, governors, and their teams to engage internationally in a way that is strategic, credible, and sustainable.

- Leverage Proximity:** For many jurisdictions, time and budget are the binding constraints. Rather than launching separate overseas missions for initial relationship-building, leaders can maximize impact through two existing channels:
- *The “Global Gateway” in Washington:* Leaders can use existing trips to the national capital to brief foreign embassies and business promotion agencies on local priorities and investment opportunities.
 - *Regional Diplomatic Hubs:* State and Local leaders should actively engage the consular corps and honorary consuls in their own or neighboring cities. For instance, cities in the Southwest leverage the high density of consulates in Los Angeles, while those in the Great Lakes engage hubs like Chicago or Detroit. Inviting these officials for site visits allows them to advocate for the region directly to their home governments.

This approach is most effective when local leaders use universities, international chambers of commerce, and companies with global ties as a catalyst. These partners provide technical expertise and existing networks that help translate a diplomatic visit into a substantive economic outcome. By treating local and regional diplomatic assets as an accessible global network, cities and states can expand their international footprint without the overhead of international travel.

Align International Engagement with Core Municipal Missions: International relationships should advance your city’s or state’s fundamental objectives—economic

development, quality of life, resilience, innovation—not exist as separate diplomatic activity. The strongest subnational diplomacy integrates international partnership into core operations.

- Create a Strategy and Structures for International Engagement:** Ad hoc international relationships risk dispersing limited resources and rarely survive changes in leadership or funding cycles. Purposeful subnational diplomacy requires prioritization, goal-setting, and monitoring. Setting up an office of international affairs with dedicated staff and budgeted resources that persist across administrations helps build durability.
- For medium and small cities that may face prohibitive resource constraints for developing an international affairs office, consider how this international focus could be a function of an existing office or position, like an Economic Development Department or the City Manager.

Maintain Productive Dialogue with Federal Partners: City, county, and state leaders can benefit from country- or issue-specific-expertise, existing frameworks or programs, and connections facilitated by federal agencies. For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce has established numerous programs for states and cities to help drive regional competitiveness and long-term economic growth.

Leverage Sister City and Sister State Relationships: Sister City relationships represent decades of accumulated trust and people-to-people connections. These relationships are diplomatic assets that should be formally integrated into trade, investment, and innovation strategy. For new relationships, State and local leaders should think strategically about how best to engage, while prioritizing economic ties and broader areas of cooperation.

Institutionalize Trade Missions and Regional Brand Messaging: Successful subnational diplomacy requires moving beyond individual competition to develop a coherent regional brand that markets a collective value

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proposition (e.g., the Great Lakes or the Pacific Coast). This strategy is most effective when implemented through organized overseas trade missions that prioritize industry-specific “dividends” over symbolic gestures that resonate with constituents.

- *Lead with the Dividend:* To prevent international engagement from being viewed as a taxpayer-funded “boondoggle,” leaders must proactively frame missions through the lens of local outcomes—specifically job creation, tax revenue, and supply chain security. Clearly articulating the Return on Investment helps insulate these programs from a narrative that can follow high-profile subnational travel.
- *Professionalize the Delegation:* Successful missions are designed “hand-in-hand” with industry, university, and academic leaders. Including these partners serves as a force multiplier, providing the technical legitimacy that ensures the trip is perceived as professional business development rather than a political junket.

Leverage the National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP): States should utilize the SPP to bridge security cooperation and economic opportunity. These decades-long, trust-based relationships with over 115 partner nations provide an established entry point for governors to formalize investment ties. By layering commercial and academic exchanges onto existing military frameworks, states can institutionalize subnational diplomacy in markets where they already possess high-level credibility and deep institutional knowledge.

Recommendations for U.S. Embassies Abroad Even when cities and states lead, they do not lead alone. Federal partners—especially embassies, consulates, and the U.S. Commercial Service—can amplify local diplomacy by opening doors, providing intelligence, and helping translate regional priorities into international opportunity. The guidance below identifies how subnational leaders and embassy teams can work together to make those partnerships more effective.

Serve as Connectors: Embassies can facilitate introductions and regular meetings between U.S. local leaders and foreign counterparts—including mayors, governors, and regional officials—to spur economic, educational, and climate-related partnerships. Examples include organizing tailored sessions for U.S. mayors and governors traveling abroad, hosting inbound delegations at U.S. embassies, or providing state and local officials with information on overseas opportunities, such as trade missions, city networks, and municipal forums. The U.S. Department of State’s Office of Public Engagement can connect you with the right people at each U.S. mission if you are unable to identify the right contact.

Provide Localized Market and Policy Intelligence: Embassies can brief subnational leaders on political dynamics, regulatory changes, investment climates, and sector-specific opportunities and risks in target countries, helping cities and states design more effective trade, investment, and cultural strategies. Beyond sharing information, embassy teams can also advocate on behalf of firms and institutions from a governor’s or mayor’s jurisdiction—raising regulatory obstacles with host-country counterparts, convening local decision-makers and business leaders, and signaling that subnational partnerships and project pipelines have the backing of the United States, which can reduce friction and build confidence for cross-border deals.

Convene Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues: Embassies have significant convening power to bring together U.S. city and state representatives, foreign officials, civil society, universities, and private sector leaders for roundtables, forums, or virtual exchanges. Embassies can both enable strategic meetings that might not have otherwise happened and provide pathways to hard-to-reach locals in-country. When used intentionally, that convening power does more than create a photo opportunity; it helps local leaders identify concrete partners, de-risk market entry, surface regulatory or political constraints early, and accelerate deals or joint projects that would be difficult to assemble on their own. Hosting city-to-city “networking” sessions, sector-specific

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industry roundtables, or urban innovation exchanges gives subnational leaders a curated space to test ideas, compare approaches, and move from general interest to actionable cooperation.

Coordinate Crisis Response and Resilience Planning:

Embassies can assist cities and states with rapid diplomatic channels during global crises—pandemics, natural disasters, or investment and visa obstacles—leveraging their networks for quick solutions that can help cities prepare playbooks for international coordination under duress.

Challenges and Risk Mitigation

The Do's:

- Develop clear criteria for evaluating potential foreign partnerships and establish engagement protocol.
- Balance long-term and time-bound partnerships. When it adds real value, invest in a few relationships that can grow over time; in parallel, use targeted, time-limited projects with clear goals where capacity, politics, or timelines make that more realistic.
- Work through, and in partnership with, community stakeholders that share similar goals. Cities and states can have minimal bandwidth to devote to international engagement in a sustained way. By tapping others with vested interests to help advance the agenda and identifying such actors, it can clarify whether the planned engagement delivers value to the community.
- Build a diverse network of advisors and consult with diplomatic and national security officials when appropriate.
- Conduct due diligence and risk assessment when evaluating new relationships. State and nonstate malign actors increasingly seek to influence and interfere with U.S. local governments, causing reputational damage and national security risks.
- Maintain regular embassy contact when preparing and executing trade missions abroad to discuss objectives and gather economic and political intelligence.
- Always consider public engagement and messaging.

A city's or state's constituents are watching and expecting clear results. Partner with other respected, trusted regional stakeholders to jointly communicate the benefits to the community.

The Don'ts:

- Don't expect states and cities to replace national government diplomacy. States and cities cannot negotiate binding international treaties or handle matters of national security. Subnational diplomacy is complementary to national diplomacy, not substitutive.
- Don't accept agreement language contradicting your values or policies. Use your leverage, impose your conditions, and reject pressure to change a stance or to criticize national policy in return for investment or other benefits.
- Don't expect sustained engagement without an institutional structure. An ad hoc international activity that depends on volunteers or individual champions rarely survives political transitions.
- Don't compete destructively within regions. When neighboring cities and counties engage in a race to the bottom for the same investment, the region loses overall. Coordinated regional strategy outperforms internal competition.

Effective subnational strategies start with local responsibilities and work outward. In practice, city, county, and state leaders are most successful when they focus on a manageable set of international priorities that clearly support existing goals—such as attracting investment, strengthening key industries, improving infrastructure, or accessing technical expertise—and provide the public with transparency about those objectives. When cross-border engagement is explicitly tied to what the jurisdiction already needs to deliver for its residents, it is easier to sustain over time, easier to explain to stakeholders, and more likely to produce concrete outcomes that justify continued effort and resources.

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When Local Leaders Think Globally

American cities and states bring capabilities that the national government alone cannot replicate: direct access to local markets and communities; an understanding of regional competitive advantages; long-term relationships that transcend political cycles; and credibility from authentic problem-solving within their jurisdictions.

These capabilities become diplomatic assets when aligned with broader interests, but only when realistic expectations are set. Subnational leaders operate within delegated authority, coordinate with the federal government, and recognize that trade and investment happen within national policy frameworks, not outside them.

To be the most effective, it is crucial to recognize that when cities and states invest genuinely in international partnerships, develop cultural competency, maintain transparent operations, and coordinate with embassies while preserving decision-making autonomy, they strengthen both local economic success and broader American international engagement. Similarly, it is important that state and local governments work alongside the federal government to encourage investments aligned with American national security interests.

The architecture of modern diplomacy today distributes power across American cities and states. These local leaders shape how millions worldwide experience American values, innovation, and commitment. Making this work requires operating at the intersection of local mission accomplishment and diplomatic awareness, where economic development and diplomatic progress reinforce rather than compromise each other.



Sports and Culture

Building Bridges Through Authentic Engagement

Sports and culture are among America's most powerful diplomatic assets, creating human-scale connections where formal diplomacy often cannot. A visual artist installing work in a community space, a musician on a neighborhood stage, a chef hosting a pop-up dinner, or an athlete on a field can cut through national politics and cultural barriers, offering audiences a direct experience of people rather than policy. These encounters happen at every level—from museum exchanges and touring ensembles to college teams on foreign tours, from Grammy-winning musicians and acclaimed choreographers to emerging artists and local creatives.

For many artists, writers, and chefs, however, the idea of “doing diplomacy” can feel at odds with the very reason they create in the first place. Their practice is often grounded in freedom of expression and a resistance to being told what to say, which can make the notion of representing a government or nation feel uncomfortable, even suspect. Athletes, by contrast, are more accustomed to speaking for a team or country and to self-editing in public, though they too rarely think of themselves as diplomats.

The opportunity is not to turn any of these practitioners into political messengers, but to recognize that their presence, values, and willingness to engage authentically with local communities already

shape how the world perceives the United States—often more powerfully than formal government messaging.

This chapter is written primarily for those practitioners themselves—artists, musicians, curators, chefs, designers, athletes, and influencers—and secondarily for the partners who work with them, from embassies to festivals and clubs to universities, leagues, and brands. It offers practical ways to approach this work with clarity, care, and impact while staying true to their own voice.

Context and Metrics

American athletes and artists have extraordinary global reach thanks to a range of market-driven platforms and government-supported programs. Here are some examples—both from less pronounced public-sector initiatives to the largest of stages—and how this reach can be channeled into deeper relationships rather than left on autopilot. Together, these metrics show that American athletes, artists, and cultural leaders already command vast, trusted audiences—positioning everyday participation, performance, and presence abroad as scalable tools for shaping perceptions, building relationships, and advancing U.S. influence.

96% of US Artists International (USAI) participants made new international professional contacts during their program experience. **92%** of participants reported that their USAI-supported experience benefited them creatively, and **77%**

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gained more social media followers as a result of their international engagement.

\$1.2 trillion (4.2% of GDP) contributed to the U.S. economy in 2023 by the arts and cultural industries, growing at twice the rate of the overall economy. In the same year, the U.S. economy recorded a \$36.8 billion trade surplus in cultural goods and services exports.

70 countries had the U.S. in their top five sources for most-streamed songs, according to the 2024 data analyzing Spotify’s Top 200 charts across 73 nations. American artists command a 79% share of streams in the domestic market and an impressive 55% share in the UK market. Recent Billboard Global 200 data shows U.S. acts accounting for 60% of the top 10 hits on the Global chart.

Forces Reshaping Sports and Cultural Diplomacy

Social Media Platforms Can Democratize Cultural and Sports Diplomacy: Social media platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram have fundamentally democratized the landscape of cultural and sports diplomacy. In the past, diplomacy was strictly the domain of governments and wealthy organizations. Social media has transformed the speed and reach of diplomatic communication. Today, a single athletic achievement shared on social media, a cultural performance livestreamed globally, or an athlete’s message on TikTok can shape international perceptions faster than traditional diplomatic channels—engaging in real-time public diplomacy with audiences that may never read an official State Department statement. That 77% of USAI participants gained followers demonstrates the tangible, lasting reach these exchanges generate. It also demonstrates how de facto diplomacy can serve to both build goodwill for the U.S. and raise the practitioner’s profile—bolstering personal brand through amplified exposure, which can translate into new professional opportunities and sponsorships.

Influencers Have Become Unintentional—and Contested—Diplomatic Actors: The Dubbed “influencer diplomacy,” this phenomenon describes the varied ways creators engage in diplomatic processes, whether through official collaborations, spontaneous content, or simply by traveling and being watched through their numerous social media channels. A food creator documenting a market in Marrakech, a fitness influencer training with locals in Kenya, or a travel vlogger navigating daily life in a country Americans rarely visit—all are shaping how their audiences understand that place and its people, whether or not they think of it that way. America’s competitors have recognized this and moved to institutionalize it. In early 2025, China’s All-China Youth Federation launched a structured program offering American creators with more than 300,000 followers all-expenses-paid cultural exchange tours, curated itineraries designed to generate authentic-seeming content about Chinese infrastructure, technology, and culture. American YouTuber IShowSpeed’s 2025 China visit, streamed to nearly 9 million viewers, was hailed by Chinese state media as a soft-power success precisely because it came from an individual rather than the government. China has run similar programs with Indonesian influencers to reshape public perception in a historically skeptical market. Whether influencers recognize their role in this arena or not, others already have.

Global Competition for Soft Power Has Intensified as Emerging Powers Invest More Strategically: The bipolarity of the Cold War model has long since become obsolete. Today’s arena is multipolar: emerging economies, regional powers, and non-Western actors leverage cultural and sporting platforms to assert influence and reframe global narratives. Countries are bidding to host major sporting events—the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup—to enhance national prestige, build international appeal, and shape global perceptions. Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup illustrates this strategy, using the mega-event as a platform for international engagement, cultural exchange, and tourism and investment attraction. The Gulf region,

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more broadly, has adopted what might be called a “full-spectrum” cultural soft-power strategy—one that combines mega-sporting events with art, heritage, and global conferences into a coherent national brand. The United Arab Emirates offers some of the most notable examples: Dubai hosted Expo 2020 (attracting participants from 192 countries), the UAE hosted the UNFCCC COP28 climate conference, and in November 2025, Dubai staged the ICOM General Conference—the largest global gathering of museum professionals—for the first time ever in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia region. Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island cultural district, anchored by the Louvre Abu Dhabi (which drew nearly 1.4 million visitors in 2024 alone), gained two new museums in 2025. The UAE explicitly established a national Soft Power Council and has publicly linked its cultural investments to tourism, economic development, and changes in global perception.

Today’s intensely competitive landscape means that cultural and sports diplomacy is no longer—and cannot be—a peripheral tool. It has become a central instrument of statecraft, with significant financial investment and strategic intentionality.

The Emergence of Esports and Gaming: Video games and esports are a relatively new tool for diplomatic engagement, offering persistent, globally accessible, and youth-oriented engagement, particularly as global demographics shift toward younger, digital-native generations. This reflects an important generational nuance: traditional cultural exports are not the only ways to effectively engage populations who spend hours daily in digital environments.

A 2025 study, “Mapping The Landscape of Game-Based Cultural Diplomacy: A Bibliometric Analysis of Global Trends and Influential Research” by Muhammad Abdul Azis and Nadia Angelina of Universitas Brawijaya, found that Japan, Poland, and China are among the nations utilizing video games and esports to promote national identity, cultural narratives, and values, reaching millions internationally. The State-backed Chinese

gaming industry incorporates traditional Chinese cultural elements—myth, history, and aesthetics—into internationally consumed games like Black Myth: Wukong and Honor of Kings, further strengthening its global footprint. Japan has a renowned video game industry and has used its canonical characters: then-Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, dressed as Mario, during the Rio 2016 Olympics closing ceremony to promote the 2020 Tokyo Games. In a 2011 visit to Poland, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk presented President Barack Obama a collector’s edition copy of The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings as an official diplomatic gesture, intended to symbolize modern Poland’s place in the global economy and its success in the high-tech entertainment software industry. The analysis shows a growing number of studies (2015–2024) dedicated to ‘game-based cultural diplomacy,’ indicating that video games and esports are being institutionalized as instruments of digital diplomacy not only by private companies but increasingly by states and policymakers.

Case Studies

The examples show that sports and cultural diplomacy work best when they are rooted in authenticity, sustained relationships, and a clear sense of purpose. Whether the setting is a basketball court, a concert hall, a wrestling mat, a kitchen, or a stadium, the most effective practitioners do not simply represent the United States—they create space for genuine exchange, mutual respect, and shared experience.

Andre Huynh: Grassroots Basketball as Bridge-Building in Vietnam

Andre Huynh, an international relations student at Oral Roberts University, discovered a pathway into sports diplomacy by combining two passions: competitive basketball and foreign service. Rather than waiting for official diplomatic programs to engage him, he created his own path by recognizing that athletic participation abroad is inherently diplomatic. Since 2023, Huynh has competed annually in basketball tournaments across Vietnam as an International Basketball Player with the Vietnam Basketball Federation. Simultaneously, he pursued formal diplomatic education through fellowships and internships with the Vietnam-Oregon Initiative Network, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City, working on trade, education, and exchange programs.

Huynh blended his love for athletics with career growth by leveraging basketball tournaments as crucial annual events in Vietnam. These tournaments were opportunities to forge meaningful connections with local athletes, coaches, and communities, allowing him to gather valuable insights about Vietnamese society that would influence his official work with the State Department.

In 2025, he returned to Vietnam over the summer to compete in national tournaments with the 2024 U20 National Basketball Champions. He also spoke at study-abroad workshops and cultural exchange programs, showcasing for Vietnamese students and parents how sports had helped him navigate American culture and develop leadership skills.

What made this successful: Huynh understood that global impact doesn’t require an official designation. His annual returns to Vietnam created sustained commitment, and his decision to pursue formal internships, alongside his athletic participation, meant he could contribute meaningfully to international relations while maintaining authentic engagement in athletics. Most importantly, Huynh recognized that the intersection of formal diplomatic education, authentic athletic participation, and commitment to strengthening a bilateral relationship created an exponential impact. His work was not performative; he was living it through the

integration of his authentic interests and professional development.

Dizzy Gillespie: Jazz as Diplomacy Before It Had a Name

Dizzy Gillespie was already an internationally recognized trumpeter by the mid-1950s when he became one of the first artists to test whether jazz could do what formal diplomacy could not. In March 1956, Gillespie led an 18-piece big band on the U.S. government’s first major jazz tour—a roughly ten-week State Department itinerary through the Middle East, South Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The band’s music director was a young Quincy Jones. In Athens, where students had recently protested at the U.S. Information Service office, many of those same students ended the night lifting Gillespie onto their shoulders after his concert. In Karachi, he asked that children waiting outside be allowed in—a small act that communicated inclusion more powerfully than any prepared remark.

The 1956 tour became the template for the formal Jazz Ambassadors program. Over the next two decades, more than 100 jazz groups would follow Gillespie’s footsteps to 80-90 countries, including Dave Brubeck behind the Iron Curtain, Louis Armstrong in newly independent Congo, and Duke Ellington across the Middle East and South Asia.

The Jazz Ambassadors model has never stopped. Today, the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz—a nonprofit partner of the State Department—carries this tradition forward with striking contemporary reach. In 2022, Hancock led a weeklong delegation to Amman, Jordan, for master classes and community performances, working alongside the same U.S. Embassy that later hosted the “Pinning Dreams” wrestling program. In 2024, Hancock and vocalist Dianne Reeves visited New Delhi and Mumbai as part of the Global Music Diplomacy Initiative, performing as a deliberate statement about artistic freedom. In January 2025, the Institute made its first-ever visit to Saudi Arabia—a market with virtually no prior musical footprint for American cultural diplomacy. What began as Dizzy Gillespie improvising for students is now a living program, adapting its instruments to the geopolitical moment while staying true to its core logic: that jazz, with its built-in ethos of listening and responding builds connections across difference.

What made this successful: Jazz embodied values the U.S. wanted to highlight: individual expression within a shared framework, listening and responding across differences, and renewal through improvisation. Gillespie did not deliver scripted messages; he answered questions honestly and let the music carry the argument. That combination of artistic excellence, openness, and respect for local audiences built credibility that formal outreach often cannot replicate. The model endures in programs like NextLevel, which sends U.S. artists and musicians overseas under the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and in the Herbie Hancock Institute’s ongoing global tours—proof that the logic Gillespie established in 1956 remains the most effective script available.

“Pinning Dreams”—Women’s Wrestling Diplomacy in Jordan

While wrestling has an ancient history in the Middle East, participation by women and girls has faced significant cultural barriers, limited infrastructure, and an absence of role models. In September 2025, the U.S. Embassy in Amman partnered with Wrestling for Peace and the Jordan Wrestling Federation to launch “Pinning Dreams,” which brought two accomplished American women wrestlers to Jordan for clinics, trainings, and cultural exchange: Nicole Tyson—Junior World Champion and first female head wrestling coach at Oklahoma City University, having guided teams to three national championships and 55 All-Americans—and Sally Roberts—CEO and founder of Wrestle Like A Girl, a U.S. Army veteran, two-time World Medalist, World Cup Champion, and three-time U.S. National Champion in wrestling. Together, over five days, they organized a two-day train-the-trainers workshop with 30 participants; provided teenage girls with their first wrestling experience and first direct exposure to female athletic role models; supported the launch of new boys and girls wrestling programs at the middle and high school level; and concluded with an intensive training session for the Jordanian National Women’s Wrestling Team.

A critical but less visible dimension of the program was Sally Roberts’ engagement with male community leaders and elders. Through time spent listening, building personal rapport, and approaching conversations with openness rather than advocacy, she earned the trust needed for families to feel comfortable allowing girls to

participate. In this way, Roberts functioned as a cultural diplomat as much off the mat as on it—helping create the social permission that made the athletic exchange possible in the first place.

What made this successful: “Pinning Dreams” worked as a sports diplomacy tool because it treated women’s wrestling as a core embassy event, not an ancillary gathering, and paired that institutional backing with two world-class athletes who showed, rather than told, what authentic female leadership in a male-dominated sport looks like. But the program’s deeper impact was cultural: by letting girls simply participate on their own terms—meeting and observing women who embodied both athletic excellence and personal confidence—the program disrupted assumptions about what girls were capable of and allowed to do. The wrestling was a vehicle; the goal was to shift cultural perceptions about girls’ participation itself. That distinction between teaching a sport and changing an attitude is the difference between a clinic and cultural diplomacy.

Gastrodiplomacy: The Diplomatic Culinary Partnership and the American Culinary Corps

The Diplomatic Culinary Partnership—often referred to as the American Culinary Corps—was created to test a simple proposition: that chefs could serve as effective cultural emissaries for the United States. Launched in 2012 in collaboration with the James Beard Foundation, the initiative enlisted dozens of prominent U.S. chefs to help plan menus for official events, travel abroad on behalf of the State Department, and host visiting delegations in their home communities, using what appeared on the plate to complicate fast food stereotypes with a more regional, immigrant-influenced, and constantly evolving portrait of American life. In 2023, the program was relaunched with an 83 member American Culinary Corps, again in partnership with the James Beard Foundation, explicitly positioning food, hospitality, and the shared dining experience as diplomatic tools for engaging foreign dignitaries and civil society alike. Even as the formal contract underpinning that collaboration came to an end in 2025, many participating chefs have continued the work through their own restaurants, pop ups, NGO partnerships, and appearances at cultural festivals, treating culinary diplomacy as a practice rather than a line item.

One mission to Pakistan illustrates how this can look in human terms. Under the Diplomatic Culinary Partnership, the State Department sent an American chef to collaborate with Pakistani television personality Chef Shai; together they visited markets, cooked in one another’s kitchens, and filmed a four-part miniseries for Masala TV. For viewers, the series offered a textured glimpse of American ingredients and traditions refracted through a Pakistani lens; for the chefs, it became a two way exchange of techniques, stories, and identities that neither could have staged alone.

What made this successful: It treated chefs as substantive partners in public diplomacy rather than as decoration. By elevating culinary professionals as cultural ambassadors, the partnership showed how American identity can be communicated through the mix of traditions on a table and the biographies of the people cooking, not only through formal political channels. That insight extends beyond government programs, whether through chef exchanges, refugee-led dinners, or programs pairing cooking demonstrations with conversations all rely on the same basic mechanism—using food to lower defenses, humanize complex issues, and build durable goodwill in ways that complement more formal diplomatic formats. Popular spaces like Disney’s Epcot World Showcase, where visitors “taste their way around the world” at a ring of national pavilions, underscore the point that many people’s first exposure to other cultures comes through cuisine, and that thoughtfully designed food centered encounters—whether in a theme park, a neighborhood kitchen, or an embassy residence—can spark curiosity about the wider world that lasts long after the meal is over.

Hockey Diplomacy in Canada: Leveraging a Shared Passion for Gender Equity and Bilateral Ties

When David L. Cohen served as U.S. Ambassador to Canada from 2021 to 2025, he recognized that hockey—Canada’s national sport—offered unique opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Rather than viewing athletic exchanges as peripheral to his mission, Cohen created a comprehensive “hockey diplomacy” program at Mission Canada, strategically leveraging sports to advance foreign policy priorities, including inclusion, youth empowerment, gender equity, health and wellness, conflict resolution, and entrepreneurship.

Cohen’s hockey diplomacy program operated on multiple levels. He attended professional games across Canada, enthusiastically supported the newly established Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL), and engaged with local college sports teams. The program also included work with the Ottawa Condors, an adaptive hockey team, demonstrating the transformative power of sport to bring people together regardless of abilities or backgrounds.

His most visible initiative was the inaugural Ambassador’s Cup Challenge in January 2024, which brought together members of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC, and the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa for a friendly hockey competition. The event brought diplomats, military personnel, and hockey enthusiasts from both nations together in a display of team spirit and good-natured rivalry.

Beyond symbolic gestures, Cohen became influential in the creation of the PWHL, demonstrating his commitment to gender equity in both sport and business. The PWHL, established in August 2023 with backing from Los Angeles Dodgers co-owner Mark Walter, represented a watershed moment for women’s professional hockey. The league features six teams (expanding to eight in 2025-26 season), includes a comprehensive collective bargaining agreement ensuring minimum salaries of \$35,000, housing and food stipends, and health insurance—benefits that previous women’s hockey leagues lacked the financial stability to provide. Cohen’s advocacy for the PWHL connected directly to broader diplomatic themes about gender equity as a national security imperative. According to the 2023 report “Let her play: An analysis of Title IX and the development of the modern female,” Title IX’s impact extends internationally, with 1,886 international women participating in NCAA Division I sports in 2021. Post-secondary education and high-level sports participation for these international women benefits them, their families, and the environments they choose to work in. Skills learned in competition on and off the field transfer to advance issues of gender parity through experience and direct application in ways previous rights movements haven’t achieved.

The timing of Cohen’s advocacy proved significant. In March 2017, the U.S. women’s hockey team threatened to boycott world championships in protest over grossly disparate policies compared to the men’s squad—including differences in travel accommodations, support

for families, and basic resources. The public outcry over such inequities supported positive changes, demonstrating how advocacy at the intersection of sports and diplomacy can drive meaningful reform.

What made this successful: Cohen understood that sports diplomacy is uniquely powerful because it bridges divides, connecting people across languages, cultures, and borders. By choosing hockey—a sport with deep cultural resonance in Canada but also a fervent following in the United States—he leveraged

From Context to Action

The data points and examples above establish the scale and competitiveness of today’s cultural diplomacy landscape. But understanding that landscape is only useful if it leads to action. We now shift from context: why sports and cultural diplomacy matter, to practice: how individual practitioners and their institutional partners can approach it well.

The best practices that follow are intended first and foremost for the practitioners themselves—visual artists, musicians, curators, chefs, dancers, designers, athletes, and digital influencers. They are secondarily for the embassy cultural affairs officers, nonprofit program managers, and corporate partners who work alongside them. The tips apply regardless of whether a practitioner is participating in a formal State Department program or simply traveling abroad and choosing to engage authentically.

One note before proceeding: authenticity is not a complication to be managed—it is the point. Artists who feel that “doing diplomacy” means softening their voice or becoming a spokesperson for positions they don’t hold will find the work hollow. Athletes who perform goodwill without genuine curiosity will not build the trust that makes cultural exchange meaningful. The best practices below are designed to help practitioners show up fully as themselves—and to show why that, precisely, is the most powerful thing they can offer.

Best Practices

Embrace the Art of Showing Up: Recognize that in sports and the arts, impact often begins simply by showing up—whether it be through authentic

shared passion to strengthen bilateral ties. His focus on gender equity through the PWHL demonstrated American values in action, not through policy statements but through tangible support for women athletes. The program succeeded because it treated sports not as entertainment but as a strategic diplomatic tool, using athletic competition to facilitate relationship-building, champion shared values, and create platforms for sustained engagement between the two nations.

participation, performance, or community interaction. Athletes and cultural leaders embody values like teamwork, creativity, resilience, and inclusion without needing to articulate them directly. A soccer player joining a local youth practice, a dancer sharing space in a community studio, or a band collaborating with local musicians can all model mutual respect and possibility. Presence becomes a form of soft power—showing that exchange is a shared experience, not a transaction—and can inspire connection even where language or politics divide.

Adapt Authentically to Local Context: Respect local culture, but don’t compromise on integrity. Research before arriving and attempt to learn a few basic words of the native language. Understand that local customs regarding gender, physical contact, and social hierarchy might not resemble those in the United States. When you encounter resistance or misalignment, ask yourself: “What am I not understanding?” rather than “Why aren’t they being receptive?” This sort of adaptation demonstrates respect and allows your message to resonate more because it shows you took local context seriously.

Coordinate with the Embassy Before Arrival: This is not about ceding control. Notifying the U.S. embassy of your upcoming performance, competition, or visit can open doors to opportunities you might not otherwise have access to, such as community clinics, youth workshops, or volunteer events that allow deeper engagement with local populations. Embassies can also provide valuable insight into local politics, culture, and sensitivities, helping you navigate potential challenges thoughtfully. In doing so, you both enhance your experience and

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support your country’s broader mission of connection and goodwill.

Embassy Integration Points

Engage Local Legends and Cultural Icons: Their participation helps transform embassy-supported events into shared experiences rather than foreign exhibitions. Examples include inviting a retired national athlete to join a sports clinic or partnering with a local designer whose style reflects national traditions. These collaborations lend authenticity and strengthen local connections. Involve local athletes, artists, or cultural icons who can help transform embassy-supported events into shared experiences rather than foreign exhibitions.

Use Sports and Culture to Reach Underserved Communities: Sports and cultural programs offer a natural bridge to communities that might be difficult to engage through traditional diplomacy. Activities such as a baseball clinic for Venezuelan youth in Chile or a gospel music exchange with teachers in Laos demonstrate how shared cultural experiences can open doors, foster inclusion, and address secondary social issues in a positive, apolitical way.

Embrace the Host Country’s Game: When designing sports exchanges, focus on the games and activities that already capture local enthusiasm rather than importing U.S.-centered sports. A netball clinic in Sri Lanka—or soccer programming almost anywhere—may resonate more deeply than baseball or American football. Sensitivity to what the host countries values demonstrates cultural awareness and helps ensure the U.S. presence feels relevant, collaborative, and respectful of local traditions.

Think Long-Term, Not One-Off: Avoid “circus mentality.” One-visit clinics create momentary excitement, but have limited lasting impact. The most effective engagement involves return visits, mentorship relationships, and genuine partnership. When there are annual return or bilateral trips, it signals sustained commitment and builds trust. When time is invested in a few relationships—

especially among leaders within a community—rather than many surface connections, it can have a deeper impact.

Provide Intelligence and Cultural Context: Brief visiting cultural leaders on local political context, cultural sensitivities, and diplomatic priorities. Help them understand which audiences matter most, the messages that resonate, and how to navigate cultural differences. A sports team visiting a country with gender equity challenges should understand Title IX and how to respectfully present women’s participation in sports. A musician should understand local religious or political sensitivities that might affect certain artistic choices.

Address Practical Support Barriers: Funding, visa logistics, insurance, and liability can create barriers to cultural engagement. Embassies should identify these obstacles and work to remove them.

Utilize Philanthropic and Corporate Partners to Amplify Reach: Sports and cultural diplomacy are too often limited to well-funded teams and performers at the highest level. Embassies should bring on board brands that already invest in sports and cultural activities to extend their reach at all levels. For example, Coca-Cola, Adidas, Nike, and Visa already invest heavily in youth sports, global tournaments, and grassroots initiatives. Embassies can approach similar sponsors to underwrite travel, equipment, or clinics when bringing college teams or artists abroad, framing it as a values-neutral investment in healthy communities, skill-building, and international connection. If cost prevents a less-endowed U.S. sports team or arts group from traveling to conduct clinics or workshops in a partner country, an embassy might approach a sportswear company or beverage sponsor already active in that sport to underwrite travel, equipment, or joint events, building on the kind of long-term sponsorships that link brands with national teams and fan development. These practical supports can be the difference between missed opportunities and meaningful exchange.

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Challenges and Risk Mitigation

The Do’s:

- Engage authentically and locally. Build genuine relationships. Spend time in communities. Listen more than you talk. Adapt your approach based on what you learn about local context and priorities. When appropriate, share a bit of your own personal story—how you came to your sport or art, what it means in your life, as this can create a deeper person-to-person connection, not just as a visiting professional alone.
- Measure and document impact. Track relationships built, people engaged, policy changes influenced. Share stories and outcomes. This demonstrates value and justifies continued investment.
- Understand that cultural diplomacy is long-term work. Short-term engagement has a limited impact. Commit to sustained effort, recognize that relationships take time to develop, and understand that full effect may not be visible immediately.

The Don’ts:

- Don’t assume all international engagement is positive. Political context matters. Before committing to engagement in a particular country, understand the political situation and whether your presence might inadvertently support a government or movement that runs counter to American values. There’s often no perfect answer, but awareness allows you to make informed choices.
- Don’t treat official guidance as a script. Government partners and embassy staff can help you understand context and audiences, but your value comes from being a genuine athlete or artist, not a spokesperson. When possible, stay true to your own style and story, and let the embassy “stitch the rest together” in how your visit is framed and amplified. Authentic engagement will almost always be more effective than trying to perform a message that does not feel like your own.
- Don’t neglect cultural sensitivities. Research local customs, religious practices, and social norms. Adapt your approach respectfully. A misstep can undo

months of goodwill-building.

- Don’t criticize or disparage your country while abroad. Even if you disagree with policies, resist public criticism when representing America internationally. This undermines your credibility and your mission.
- Don’t assume what worked in one country will work in another. Cultural context varies dramatically. A sports program that succeeded in India may fail in Oman without adaptation. Research, listen, and adapt.

Final Takeaway

Social media and digital technology now allow athletes and cultural leaders at every level—not just the “stars”—to reach international audiences directly and in real time. This expanded visibility means that a routine performance, match, or collaboration abroad can quickly become a de facto act of representation, shaping how people understand the United States.

These developments create enormous practical opportunities. Everyday Americans—coaches, college athletes, community artists, touring ensembles—can build relationships that cut across borders, showcase shared interests, and keep dialogue going even when politics are tense. For embassies, this is a chance to work with a much wider pool of credible messengers whose work already resonates with local communities. They also require intentional support. Without light-touch guidance and connection, engagement can be fragmented, miss obvious local partners, or simply fail to reach communities where it could matter most.

When this works well—when missions create platforms and partnerships, when visits are grounded in local context, when athletes and artists feel free to share their genuine journeys—the results can be powerful. Trust grows through repeated, human-scale interactions; perceptions shift as people encounter Americans who listen, participate, and collaborate; and the country’s cultural energy finds a visible, relatable expression on courts, stages, and streets around the world.

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