Recognizing the increasingly important role that state and local officials play in international relations, some U.S. lawmakers say it's time to boost federal support for these activities. Their idea: Create a new Office of Subnational Diplomacy within the U.S. State Department.

The office would be led by an ambassador-at-large on subnational diplomacy (appointed by the president, confirmed by the U.S. Senate). The newly created office and ambassador would:

- coordinate federal support (across all agencies) for state and local international engagements;
- provide advisory assistance to support these subnational engagements;
- promote U.S. foreign policy goals through support of subnational efforts, and align those goals where appropriate; and
- maintain a database of all subnational engagement.


For many years, building cross-border relationships has been a central goal of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Midwest-Canada Relations Committee. This subnational group of state and provincial lawmakers sponsors legislative exchanges and works together on cross-border issues such as trade, border security and energy. Ohio Rep. Robert Cupp, co-chair of the committee, says the group has had success in “building trusting relationships, mutual understanding and practical ideas.” Additional support from the federal government, he adds, could further these goals. Likewise, he sees benefits for the U.S. government in elevating subnational diplomacy.

“[It] may enable better ‘upflow’ of state-provincial formulated solutions to the national governments,” he says, “and better inform federal decision-making.”

The Midwest-Canada Relations Committee is one of many examples of how states, local governments and their various associations have become more involved in international affairs.

Sponsors of the federal legislation point to several benefits of this activity: promoting U.S. exports (Midwestern states, for example, have trade offices around the world); encouraging greater foreign direct investments; and helping develop formal agreements on issues such as energy, the environment and public safety.