FOREIGN POLICY

Trading Below the State: Unlocking Subnational Diplomacy and Trade in Post-Brexit Britain

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Abstract

In the post-Brexit landscape, UK foreign and trade policy remains heavily centralised, overlooking the potential of subnational diplomacy (the international engagement of regions below that of the state) and trade in driving economic performance. This paper assesses the effectiveness of subnational diplomatic engagement, utilising the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) as a primary case study. By employing a mixed-methods approach, we investigate current subnational frameworks in the context of international trade and diplomatic agreements. This paper finds that, although producing real economic benefits in investment, job creation, and growth, the effects of subnational diplomacy have been limited. The data analysis suggests that this is primarily due to institutional and macroeconomic constraints, with short-term exports boost having little effect on growth. Consequently, we propose the government, in partnership with combined authorities themselves, work to create a comprehensive strategy and framework to build capacity for Combined Authorities, this allowing for more region-focussed national policy, locally-led trade and growth initiatives, and resilience against domestic and global macroeconomic shocks.

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Policy Recommendations:

1. **Establish WY International Office and Strategy:** WYCA's current international engagement is ad hoc, and split across multiple sectors as well as local councils and promotional bodies. WYCA should create a single coordination body responsible for inward investment, trade missions, and international partnership management, This should be backed by a singular published strategy in a similar manner to GMCA to set out targets, delivery strategies and measurable outcomes. This would give investors clear insights into local opportunities bolstering trust and engagement.

2. **CAs Adopt Common Subnational Diplomacy Framework:** Currently, the success of any international activities can only be measured through press announcements and limited published details, rather than any measurable benefits or in-depth statistics. Therefore, all Combined Authorities should use a common reporting framework, including information on specific deals for firms and exports, job figures and follow-up activity for longer-term analysis. This would not only allow for clearer evidence of success but would also improve accountability and research, thus improving the quality of international policy in the future.

3. **Government-Led Establishment of Subnational Trade Support Body & Consultation Framework:** At present, Combined Authorities have no formal role in shaping the national trade policies that affect their local economies. The government should therefore create a formal consultation framework which allows for Combined Authorities to contribute to policymaking and build the institutional capacity needed to implement it. The government should then consult with Combined Authorities at regular intervals to ensure that their ongoing needs are met and acted upon. The government must also establish a fund and body to support regional priorities and sectoral strengths through data analysis, targeted funding and follow-ups. This would not amount to real devolved powers, but would create a more actionable partnership between government and localities to deliver capacity. Otherwise, subnational diplomacy will remain limited in scope and will be uneven in impact.

Former UK Prime Minister, David Cameron (Wikimedia Commons)

Introduction

Motivation

Following the UK's exit from the European Union, the government's foreign policy has shifted focus to securing new independent international trade agreements, embodied by the so-called 'Global Britain' agenda. This national level focus has, however, overlooked an emerging yet crucial building block of contemporary international relations, its domestic regions. Britain's path to economic success and the fulfilment of the previous Conservative government's Levelling Up programme, aimed at addressing historical economic imbalances across the regions compared to London and the south east, depend on harnessing the slack capacity of regional economic entities. Previous levelling up efforts have been criticised for a lack of tangible and sustained impact, necessitating a new, regionalised approach to foreign and trade policy.

Current international relations scholarship increasingly highlights the salience of subnational diplomacy (or para diplomacy). Cities, regions and other devolved administrations are increasingly acting as semi independent international actors by engaging in diplomacy, trade missions and international networking. This engagement can either complement or conflict with national policy. Regions are crucial as they possess distinct regional specialisms, and their ability to engage internationally as independent entities therefore can directly impact their economic performance.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)

Here, we use West Yorkshire, via the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), as a test case for the effectiveness of subnational diplomacy in the UK. We do this for three reasons:

- **Economic Strength:** Leeds is England's second largest legal and financial hub outside of London, and has a strong manufacturing and textile sector. There are also growth healthtech
- **Political Will:** WYCA Mayor Tracy Brabin has, as we discuss below, demonstrated a uniquely strong political will to engage both with other mayors and on the world stage.
- **Locality:** As a Leeds-based, student think tank, we are best placed to affect change in our local area and connect with stakeholders.

Research Gap & Methodology

The core focus of this paper is to provide clarity on whether subnational diplomatic efforts have translated into real economic benefit, particularly in the post-brexit UK context.

Our methodology employs a mixed methods approach:

- **Qualitative:** A detailed examination of the theoretical underpinning, existing institutional structure, WYCA partnership case studies, along with other themes. We use this evidence to discuss the institutional limitations and opportunities already taken.
- **Quantitative:** We track the change of exports by region, as well as make a region-by-region and sector-by-sector comparison to assess correlation with the qualitative component, as well as identify imbalances.

Our final policy proposals, for both the government and combined authorities (WYCA) will reflect evidence drawn from these two streams, allowing the UK to better harness regional diplomatic capacity for real economic gain.

Literature Review

This paper uses the concept of subnational diplomacy to analyse whether diplomatic activities through international trade partnerships conducted by local authorities in West Yorkshire has been beneficial. It addresses the impact of these partnerships on the region, and its aims of international recognition and regional development.

The conceptualisation of subnational diplomacy, also termed 'paradiplomacy', has seen an increase in its discussion within the field of International Relations (IR) and comparative politics. Duchacek (1984) significantly contributed to the establishment of the concept and set the stage for further developments and debate by writers such as Joana Setzer. There is a consensus within the literature that IR studies need to move beyond a state-focused approach to the analysis of multilevel interactions. The development of subnational diplomacy has come with the acknowledgement of an increasing role of non-state actors engaging in international affairs. The acceptance of state alternatives as international actors has become more widespread and institutionalised (Setzer & Anderton, 2019).

Theories on Multi-Level Governance (MLG) best explain the concept of paradiplomacy. Hooghe and Marks discuss MLG as a "dispersion of authority" across multiple levels of decision making (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, p. 233). Here, there are "systems of continuous negotiation for governing across boundaries", where authority is dispersed vertically and horizontally (Daniell & Kay, 2017, p. 6). This is necessary for subnational trade in West Yorkshire as governance must operate at multiple levels to capture the variations in the extended reach of regional policy externalities (Daniell & Kay, 2017, p. 6). MLG theory argues that policy making must be in alignment with the geographical scale at which the policy effects are felt, as there are spill overs - externalities (Daniell & Kay, 2017, p. 6).

Investment from trade moves beyond national borders, where export markets that can benefit West Yorkshire require access to foreign markets. A purely national strategy may not be sufficient here, hence MLG encourages governance at varying levels. This is through enabling local authorities to engage in economic activity with other state and non-state actors which would traditionally be considered the role of the state. Local authorities may engage in international (economic) relations to align governance with the economic realities of the territory of West Yorkshire. Subnational governments are considered within a broader structure of shared authority. Therefore, this can provide benefit to the region of West Yorkshire as it enables the flexibility to optimize policy making (Daniell & Kay, 2017, p. 7). This is through horizontal and vertical multi-directional shifts in decision-making authority (Daniell & Kay, 2017, p. 7).

Currently, literature in this area of study focuses on the causes of local governments acting independently of the state and the consequences on state objectives. Cornago states that a strong motivator for subnational diplomacy is a combination of institutional autonomy and the increasing political will for international recognition (Cornago, 2010, p. 35). This is supported by Alison Holmes, where an increase in networks and interconnectedness have contributed to the development of subnational diplomacy (Holmes, 2025, p. 14).

According to Ian Klaus, the interests of foreign policy makers and local authorities are converging, therefore providing an increasing importance in engaging with local authorities (Klaus, 2021, pp. 202, 204). Royles also touches on the increasing recognition of local authorities internationally and the importance of turning cities into key international actors (Royles, 2017, pp. 411-412). Klaus, the concept's significance lies in the fact that cities are centres of populations, therefore identifying cities as a key actor in IR (Klaus, 2021, p. 202). This is due to the high concentration of citizens in cities relative to rural areas. Additionally, cities who act to preserve the interests of their specific regions serve foreign policy for middle- and lower-income groups within their population (Klaus, 2021, p. 204).

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Currently, the literature does not provide a complete picture of subnational diplomacy. Subnational diplomacy from local authorities has garnered little focus compared to other non-state actors such as NGOs. There is a general consensus on the necessity of further research . A key area to be researched further is redefining paradiplomacy as a concept, as its theoretical foundations are limited. Karen Anderson and Joana Setzer, also writing on 'Subnational Leaders and Diplomacy' support this, emphasising that "no single theory or body of literature fully explains the nature of subnational diplomacy" (Setzer & Anderton, 2019, p. 14).

This view is also supported by Francesca Dickson and their article on 'The Internationalisation of Regions', where the increasing role of local authorities means the literature must strive towards a conceptual understanding (Dickson, 2014, p. 698). These ideas are significant to this paper because theory development is necessary to contribute to our understanding of the agency of local authorities and the significance of this to IR (Dickson, 2014, p. 698). Research must shift away from a state focus and engage with larger questions through a more analytical rather than descriptive approach (Dickson, 2014, p. 698).

Setzer has also written on the boundaries of subnational diplomacy, through a legal lens and within an environmental context (Setzer, 2015). This enables an understanding of the barriers that prevent subnational governments engaging in international affairs (Setzer, 2015, p. 336). For Setzer, again the literature has an incomplete picture of the role of subnational governments legal capacity to operate across levels (Setzer, 2015, p. 336). These legal barriers are in the form of constitutional limitations and the monopoly of the state within IR (Setzer, 2015, pp. 336-337). The legality of subnational diplomacy is contested, where changing domestic and international frameworks is required to accommodate local authorities' participation in international affairs (Setzer, 2015, p. 337).

Methodology

Empirical Strategy and Panel Structure

Here we will outline the research design, data sources and econometric methods used to analyse the effects of export growth in UK regions on GDP growth and employment rates. This will be done using secondary, quantitative data, sourced from the ONS and HMRC. This will be done using 2 panel data models looking at the regions of England (ITL1 level).

The dependent variables are GDP growth and employment rate, which have been examined in separate model specifications. Our explanatory variable is exports, which are measured as a proportion of GDP. This has been controlled by regional exposure to Brexit, with Brexit measured from 2016 onwards (so from the referendum), aiming to determine whether regions who have kept a higher proportion of their exports going to the EU have experienced different economic outcomes. The construction of this variable is below. Additional controls include the share of exports going to the EU, Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour, a proxy for regional labour productivity and the yearly change in regional gross fixed capital formation, to capture investment dynamics.

$$BrexitExposure_{i,t} = Brexit_t \cdot (EUXshare_{i,t} - meanEUXshare_i)$$

Where $meanEUXshare_i$ is the regional mean from 2012-2015 of the proportion of exports to the EU.

Fixed Effects Specification

The baseline specification considered for this analysis is a pooled OLS. However, pooled OLS can be problematic in panel settings due to the assumption that no unobserved heterogeneity exists between regressors. This is especially significant in this model due to it being based on English regions which can differ in industrial composition, institutional quality, geography, and access to infrastructure, among other things, with all these characteristics possibly determining trade exposure and therefore economic performance. If this was not accounted for, results would be biased and inconsistent.

Equally, it is important to control for time effects. With our time span being from 2007-2023, major macroeconomic events have happened (the financial crisis, Brexit, Covid etc.), all of which risk inducing correlated residuals across regions if uncontrolled. Therefore, a two-way fixed effects specification has been used.

To verify the use of two-way fixed effects, both an F-test and a Hausman Test were done on the data, with the F-test determining that fixed effects was preferred over pooled OLS, and the Hausman test confirming that fixed effects was preferred to random effects.

Models

When testing model 1, which can be seen below, we tested using both a 1 year lag, to control for reverse causality, and non-lagged variables to determine the best specification. The lagged variables have been used in the specification used, as can be seen in the equation.

Model 2 does not use lagged variables as no evidence was found of reverse causality when tested. Both models have been built by starting with a baseline set of variables and then GFCF and GVA were added in separately to try and control for omitted variable bias.

Model 1:

$$GDPgrowthi,t = \beta 1Exportsi,t\text{-}1 + \beta 2BrexitExposurei,t\text{-}1 + \beta 3EUXshare + \beta 4ChangeGFCF1,t\text{-}1 + \beta 5GVAi,t\text{-}1 + \alpha i + \gamma t + \varepsilon i,t$$

Model 2:

$$Employmentrate_{i,t} = \beta_1 Exports_{i,t} + \beta_2 GDPgrowth_{i,t} + \beta_3 BrexitExposure_{i,t} + \beta_4 ChangeGFCF_{i,t} + \beta_5 GVA_{i,t} + \beta_6 EUXshare_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

Results

Model 1

Variable	Baseline	+ GVA	+ change in GFCF
Lagged exports	-0.011	-0.016	-0.023
	(-0.04)	(-0.038)	(-0.039)
Lagged Brexit exposure	-0.045**	-0.046**	-0.044***
	(-0.015)	(-0.014)	(-0.013)
EUXshare	0.018	0.027	0.026
	(-0.017)	(-0.017)	(-0.017)
Lagged GVA		0.230***	0.253***
		(-0.053)	(-0.055)
Lagged change GFCF			0.006
			(-0.014)
Num.Obs.	153	153	144
R2	0.038	0.126	0.135
R2 Adj.	-0.17	-0.072	-0.076

*Standard errors in parentheses, * p < 0.10, p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.*

Our lagged exports variable is negative and statistically insignificant across each column, with coefficients between –0.011 and –0.023 and standard errors consistently larger than this. Therefore, we have no evidence to suggest that a region's overall export openness exerts an independent effect on GDP growth in this sample.

The lagged Brexit exposure term is negative and statistically significant across all specifications. The stability of this variable with the addition of productivity and investment is encouraging, as it suggests the negative association between EU trade diversion and GDP growth is not driven by omitted variable bias. We can interpret this negative sign as regions whose EU export share fell below pre-Brexit levels experienced greater GDP growth.

Lagged GVA, representing labour productivity, is our only other significant variable, being both positive and significant. In both specifications it is added in, the coefficient is positive, at 0.230 and 0.253, suggesting that regions with greater labour productivity experience greater economic growth. Model 2 presents 2-way fixed effects estimates for the regional employment rate.

Model 2

Variable	Baseline	+ change GFCF	+ GVA	+ EUXshare
Exports	0.053*	0.063**	0.074***	0.062**
	(-0.025)	(-0.024)	(-0.0210	(-0.02)
Brexit exposure	0.015*	0.016*	0.013	0.029***
	(-0.007)	(-0.007)	(-0.01)	(-0.008)
GDP growth	-0.034	-0.041	0.019	0.026
	(-0.048)	(-0.045)	(-0.045)	(-0.041)
Change GFCF		-0.01	-0.008	-0.007
		(-0.008)	(-0.007)	-0.007
GVA			-0.157***	-0.165***
			(-0.036)	(-0.032)
EUXshare				-0.016
				(-0.009)
Num.Obs.	153	144	144	144
R2	0.05	0.078	0.175	0.186
R2 Adj.	-0.155	-0.137	-0.026	-0.021

*Standard errors in parentheses, * p < 0.10, p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.*

Exports are positive and significant in model 2 with coefficients ranging from 0.053 to 0.074, but in the full specification the coefficient is 0.062 at the 1% significance level. The consistency and strengthening of this coefficient as additional controls are introduced is the most robust finding across both models, suggesting greater regional export openness is associated with higher employment rates, independent of our other variables.

Brexit exposure creates a more complicated picture. The inconsistency of significance levels, especially with the addition of EU export share, suggests that these 2 variables have multicollinearity between them. EU export share is negative and marginally significant, whilst Brexit exposure gets bigger with its addition. This pattern suggests overlapping variation between the variables, and so we will not consider the results with EU export share.

However, the positive sign of Brexit exposure directly contradicts model 1. This suggests that regions who have experienced an increase in their export share to the EU since Brexit have experienced greater employment levels.

Brexit protesters outside the House of Commons (Wikimedia Commons)

However, it is difficult to create a cohesive economic narrative alongside the GDP growth model as we would expect that a variable that increases employment rates should have a similar effect on GDP growth. It would be naive to assume that our model is showing a structural divergence between the output and labour market responses to Brexit. Rather, it seems more likely that this inconsistency is a symptom of a small sample size and insufficient statistical power.

When looking at the other control variables, GDP growth and GFCF are both negative, apart from GDP growth with the addition of GVA, and insignificant. GVA, however, has both a negative and highly significant coefficient. This is consistent with labour-saving technological progress theories.

Limitations and Policy Implications

Currently, statistics on regional exports are hard to come by in the UK. We have used the largest available dataset, HMRC data starting in 2007, however this data is only measuring the export of goods. Regions such as Yorkshire and the Humber, London and the South East all have significant service sectors which are not accounted for in our model. The ONS started publishing regional trade in goods and services in 2016, so in the coming years our model could be redone using the larger available dataset.

Both models have extremely low coefficient of determination, showing weak model fit. Whilst the addition of more variables seems to answer some omitted variable bias, R2 is 0.135 and 0.186 respectively when each model has all variables involved. This is likely due to the small sample size of the model, with a small amount of degrees of freedom in both which diminishes with the addition of extra variables. This is consistent with both models having negative adjusted R2.

The opposing signs of Brexit exposure between the GDP growth and employment models highlights the statistical weakness of the models and therefore creates an interpretative challenge. To be able to draw a fair conclusion of the effect of Brexit on English regional economies, the effect on related variables like GDP growth and employment rate should be consistent across specifications.

The significant positive coefficient of exports in model 2 is important as it shows us the importance of exports in determining employment rates. Whilst this is inconsistent with the results of model 1, the coefficient from model 2 is consistent with economic literature and so it would be wise for English regions to design policy around boosting export growth.

Additionally, whilst in our GDP growth model exports have not shown to be a statistically significant variable, we feel that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that UK regions should neglect investing in exporting firms and growing international partnership. With the recency of trade deals such as those between the UK and India and the West Yorkshire – Nashville healthcare deal it is currently difficult to interpret the success on a regional level of deals like these.

However, papers such as Baier et al. (2008) do suggest that international partnerships boost a country's trade outcomes so we would suggest that both the UK government and WYCA should be pursuing more partnerships like the UK-India and West Yorkshire-Nashville ones.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority: Capacity and Context

Institutional Setup

West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) was established in April 2021, making it one of England's newest Combined Authorities (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021). Covering Leeds, Bradford, Kirklees, Calderdale and Wakefield, WYCA governs 2.3 million people and a £59 billion economy, the fourth largest among English city-regions outside London. The authority received £1.14 billion gainshare funding over 30 years and controls the devolved adult education budget (£63 million annually), alongside strategic planning and transport powers (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021). This late establishment means WYCA has operated for only four years, substantially less institutional maturity than regional neighbours like Greater Manchester (established 2011). The governance structure requires navigating five councils with distinct identities and historically competitive relationships, particularly between Leeds and Bradford, creating coordination challenges for unified international positioning. This showcases how council competition can fragment what could otherwise be a unified regional profile to overseas partners and investors.

Trade Negotiation Powers Reserved for Government

As a local government, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority exercises important devolved powers, yet holds no legal capacity to negotiate in international trade agreements. Constitutional framework remains a part of the royal prerogative and is exercised by the central government in practice (UK Government, 2019). The region finds itself excluded from formal participation in trade negotiations, despite having governance powers in key policy areas. This highlights a structural disconnect between trade policy and local governance. The Centre on Inclusive Trade Policy corroborates this finding, reporting that 91 per cent of UK free trade agreements signed since 2017 have affected local governments' policy domains (CITP, 2024). Key sectors such as transport, education and energy policy remain under local governance, yet subnational bodies have no formal role in shaping these agreements. Local interests are resultingly suppressed, reflecting a fundamental imbalance of power.

The 2020 West Yorkshire Deal echoes this imbalance. Despite securing £30 million annually across thirty years for supporting infrastructure and local regeneration, it explicitly ruled out devolving international trading powers (West Yorkshire Devolution Deal, 2021). West Yorkshire cannot determine how its commercial produce interacts with the global market, reflecting a lack of integrated economic strategy. With economic planning remaining disjointed, the region's priorities do not receive any attention. Parliamentary reviews corroborate how local governments' role is consultative rather than determinative. Representatives of subnational bodies are typically limited to briefings, stakeholder roundtables of non-binding advisory input. This demonstrates a wider trend of structural inefficiency, neglecting regional priorities and minimising growth.

In this way, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority can only influence trade outcomes indirectly. Under the current constitutional system the benefits of subnational engagement in trade and diplomacy remain limited. Negotiating strategies and outcomes remain at the mercy of the national government, under a national framework. If a subnational model was granted, local governments could maximise productivity by influencing their own outcomes. However, as it stands, not such powers exist.

Trade and International Relations: Brexit and New Direction

Since Brexit, the centralisation of the UK trade policy and the replacement of EU structural funds with the UK Shared Prosperity fund (worth £2.6 billion across England) has restricted the financial autonomy of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (UK Shared Prosperity Fund, 2024). With limited fiscal powers and no control over international trade, the region's ability to shape agreements determining regional growth remains insignificant. While soft diplomacy and partnership building offers potential opportunities for indirect

Despite being formally excluded from treaty-making, the combined authority can still engage in subnational trade diplomacy, something unavailable to non-national governments. These activities fall outside of traditional state-led negotiations but can still strengthen the region's global economic position. Key levers include increasing exports, foreign direct investment and targeted engagement with priority overseas markets such as North America, Germany, the Nordics and the Trans-Pacific region.

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority is increasingly ambitious to grow, aiming to support 500 additional firms to export and raise the region's export value to £20 billion by 2026 (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). Given that only 11 per cent of West Yorkshire's firms currently export, this is a challenge, although the region already has a strong international footprint (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024). Both North America and India have strong trade links with West Yorkshire, demonstrating significant opportunities for deepening market reach.

West Yorkshire can capitalise on the region's strong performance in inward investment. In 2024. For example, the region secured 52 new FDI projects, a 53 per cent increase compared to 2023 (Farrel, 2025). Such successes are not guided by government treaty agreements, but through trade missions delivered jointly with the Department for Business and Trade. Such partnerships with regions sharing sectoral strengths and succinct international marketing open new opportunities for West Yorkshire's sectoral strengths. Building on new partnerships effectively would highlight the importance of tackling collective challenges. Shared strategies and resource allocation would deliver responses more directly for local regions, meaning everyone benefits.

Together, these approaches demonstrate how the West Yorkshire Combined Authority can successfully exercise trade diplomacy without having a formal negotiating role. Whilst it exists within a highly centralised national trade policy framework, it can leverage exports, FDI and global partnerships to shape economic outcomes. If results prove to be constructive in the long term, this could build a case for increasing local governments' trading powers.

Economic Profile and Sectoral Strengths

West Yorkshire's economic geography reflects incomplete industrial transition, creating heterogeneous sectoral capabilities. Leeds functions as the UK's largest financial centre outside London, employing approximately 30,000 in banking, legal services and a growing fintech cluster (Leeds City Council, 2023; TheCityUK, 2024). However, WYCA (2021) analysis identified £2.4 billion of services exports affected by post-Brexit regulatory barriers, particularly loss of financial service passporting.

The Health Innovation sector of this region possesses significant assets including Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust and three universities with medical faculties. WYCA (2024) established a "Healthtech Bridge" partnership with Nashville, Tennessee (Health Innovation Leeds, 2024), targeting this sector for international development. However health tech remains nascent compared to Cambridge or Oxford clusters, with most activity serving domestic NHS markets.

In the Manufacturing and Advanced Materials sector, China-Britain Business Council (2024) reports Yorkshire and Humber accounts for 94% of UK unprocessed textiles exports to China, indicating persistent capabilities despite industrial decline. Advanced manufacturing in chemicals (particularly around Huddersfield) and engineering components represents more significant contemporary activity.

International Strategy and Fragmentation

WYCA's 2021 Strategic Economic Framework articulated ambitions for an "internationally connected economy" but lacked operational specificity (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021). More detailed Cluster Action Plans emerged in October 2024, identifying health innovation, financial services and manufacturing as international priorities (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024). WYCA hosted a Commonwealth Trade and Investment Conference in October 2024, explicitly positioning West Yorkshire for Commonwealth relationships, reflecting both Brexit-driven diversification and Bradford's South Asia diaspora connections (Womble Bond Dickinson, 2024).

However, critical gaps remain. WYCA has not published a comprehensive International Strategy document with clear targets, resource allocations or evaluation frameworks. Unlike Greater Manchester's MIDAS investment agency (established 1997) , West Yorkshire lacks unified trade promotion infrastructure. Instead international activity remains fragmented. Leeds remains "Marketing Leeds", Bradford has separated functions and WYCA's own team remains small. This fragmentation creates confusion for investors and exporters about who represents 'West Yorkshire' internationally. Greater Manchester's experience before MIDAS is instructive in this case, as fragmented promotion during the 1990s was found to actively lose in investment enquires as overseas firms could not identify a single point of contact. WYCA risks replicating this problem without equivalent consolidation. Resources appear modest given WYCA's £38 million annual gainshare must cover all economic development activities across 95,000+ business and multiple sectors (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021). The authority maintains no permanent overseas offices, relying on episodic trade missions rather than sustained international presence.

The Greater Manchester Benchmark

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) provides crucial comparative context. GMCA published a formal International Strategy in 2022 with explicit priorities across five areas including trade flow growth and FDI attraction (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2024). Its MIDAS agency employs approximately 30 staff with overseas partnerships and an established track record. This represents substantially more sophisticated institutional infrastructure than WYCA currently possesses. However, GMCA's performance reveals Combined Authority limitations as well. Greater Manchester exported £15.6 billion in 2021, approximately 18% of GDP, below the national average (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2022; UK Parliament, 2021). Export performance has not dramatically improved despite a decade of operation and explicit international strategy.

This matters because it suggests the ceiling on Combined Authority trade performance is not primarily institutional maturity which WYCA could in principle develop over time, but through structural powers available under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016.

GMCA's 2024 parliamentary evidence identified fundamental constraints including data limitations, limited fiscal tools versus devolved nations and inability to influence national trade agreements (UK Parliament, 2024). The comparison suggests institutional maturity matters and WYCA's fragmentation and limited resources constrain effectiveness. But it also reveals that even sophisticated Combined Authorities struggle to demonstrate clear trade impact within current constitutional and fiscal constraints established by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016.

Sufficiency of Current Arrangements?

The evidence suggests significant inadequacy as fiscal constraints prevent competitive incentives. Fragmented infrastructure creates confusion and furthermore regional trade data exists only at Yorkshire and Humber level, making West Yorkshire-specific tracking impossible (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2024; HMRC, 2023; ONS, 2024). The exclusion from national trade negotiations means no input on agreements affecting regional industries and limited diplomatic infrastructure constrains sustained international relationship-building.

HMRC (2023) Regional Trade Statistics reported that Yorkshire and the Humber was one of three English regions experiencing export value decreasing in the 12 months to September 2023, declining from a historical baseline of £18.1 billion in goods exports in 2018 (Insider Media, 2019). However, there are some bright spots: China-Britain Business Council (2024) reported that Yorkshire and the Humber experienced 18.5% growth in China exports in 2023, among the fastest-growing UK regions, though attribution to WYCA strategy versus sectoral factors remains unclear.

The realistic question may not be whether Combined Authorities can drive transformative export growth, as they are impeded with current constraints, but whether institutional development and sustained engagement can generate modest benefits such as helping business access markets, facilitating specific investments or ensuring regional strengths are visible to international partners. This calibrated framing reflects realistic possibilities and provides context for evaluating WYCA's specific international partnership and business support mechanisms examined in subsequent sections.

Get Ready for Brexit Government Campaign (Wikimedia Commons)

International Partnership Case Studies

West Yorkshire-Nashville Health-Technology Bridge

Signed in October 2024, the West Yorkshire-Nashville Health-Technology Bridge was agreed by West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin and Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connel. It reflects the growing strategic value of subnational trade and diplomatic agreements for UK regions. It is designed to share trade, investment and knowledge between the two regions' health-technology sectors, with both regions bringing together complementary strengths (Health Innovation Leeds, 2024). West Yorkshire is a key area for startups, business infrastructure and close NHS infrastructure, whilst Nashville provides a thriving life sciences network centred around the Vanderbilt University Medical Centre. Together, the regions can tackle shared challenges through co-ordinated innovation, addressing aging populations and the growing pressure on healthcare resources. For West Yorkshire, a vital economic opportunity is presented, directly supporting its ambitions to grow its £160 million HealthTech and Digital Tech Investment Zone (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025).

The agreement has already seen West Yorkshire businesses travel to Nashville for meetings with investors, potential partners and institutional figures. These engagements produced tangible outcomes that will boost the region's innovation infrastructure. In particular, West Yorkshire's HealthTech accelerator, delivered by Popel Healthcare West Yorkshire, secured £4.5 million in new funding (Propel HealthTech, 2025). Hundreds of businesses are set to receive new support over the next five years, demonstrating how subnational diplomatic activities can direct investment into regions effectively.

Despite the Bridge still being in its early stages, it is expected to deliver significant long-term prosperity. The Investment Zone linked to the agreement aims to secure £220 million of private investment and generate 2,500 jobs over five years, strengthening West Yorkshire's global profile (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025).

It also widens the local health-sector's capacity by creating pathways for enhanced collaboration with the NHS. However, because the agreement was only established in October 2024, much of its impact remains uncertain. The full extent to which West Yorkshire, and combined authorities more broadly, will benefit from subnational trade links will become clearer as such initiatives progress and their social and economic effects begin to materialise.

UK-India Trade Mission

In the pursuit of bilateral growth, British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer travelled to India in October 2025 to showcase the UK's healthcare innovation to the Indian market. Whilst not explicitly subnational trade, the mission's results will be massively beneficial for West Yorkshire. For instance, its aim to build new partnerships with Indian hospitals, healthcare providers and technology firms, will capitalise on shared challenges (Kripa, 2024).

One of the largest motivations behind the visit was the ambition to strengthen research and innovation links, strengthening existing scientific co-operation between British and Indian institutions (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018). By presenting itself as a long-term innovation partner for India's dynamic healthcare ecosystem, West Yorkshire will see its health technology, medical technology and digital services prosper.

Starmer led what has been described as the UK's largest ever trade mission to India. He has demonstrated new efforts to turn the 2025 India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement into concrete business and innovation outcomes. Over 125 CEOs, university vice chancellors and cultural sector leaders joined him on his two-day visit to Mumbai and other locations (Prime Minister's Office, 2025).

Delegates from West Yorkshire's industrial, financial, creative and academic sectors were included, demonstrating the region's broader strategy to integrate itself into the trade deal. Such a commitment to foster joined trade, investment and co-operation under the strategic framework of the agreement will see West Yorkshire benefit. From the £1.3 billion worth of new investment into the UK, the region will see a portion of this invested into its sectors. In turn, it will also collect a share of the predicted 6,900 new jobs, helping to boost the local workforce (Prime Minister's Office, 2025). Whilst West Yorkshire is not the sole beneficiary, the mission has attracted new investment into the region.

Despite not being a subnational trade mission, the mission's commitment to increasing trade, investment and research co-operation will inevitably benefit West Yorkshire. Whilst these numbers illustrate the UK's gains as a whole, the region will still see new funding and job creation. Not only does this create immediate economic benefits, but it will also create new future opportunities in trade and research.

UK-Switzerland-Germany Trade Mission

West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin travelled to Switzerland on 22 February 2026 on the region's latest international trade mission. The delegation first arrived in Zurich, followed by the German cities of Karlsruhe, Heilbronn and finally Stuttgart. Initially tasked with facilitating European trade, recent international developments have increased the stakes of the mission. US President Donald Trump's global trade war has jeopardised global markets, with the newest baseline tariffs for the UK being ten per cent (Parliament. House of Commons, 2026). This will inevitably impact West Yorkshire's projected growth, with exports of goods having accounted for 41 per cent of trade in 2023 (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025).

Areas such as Bradford, Huddersfield and Leeds will be particularly impacted because of their wide manufacturing bases. Paired with the unfolding tensions in the Middle East, companies are increasingly looking toward the European continent for economic security.

Concerns surrounding key trading routes have been raised, with West Yorkshire and the wider UK markets relying on the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal for shipping lines.

The new prospect of increasing operating costs and market prices for local businesses has resulted in other commercial avenues being explored.

With twelve West Yorkshire companies comprising the delegation, the importance of the trade mission for the local economy is reflected. Creating warmer trade relations with Switzerland and Germany has the potential to build on the success of previous trade missions, such as the UK-India trade mission and the trade bridge with Nashville. In this sense, UK-European trade is becoming more important with America increasingly isolating itself in the global order.

A better working relationship with Germany and Switzerland would diversify West Yorkshire's trade links, increasing access to the EU's largest economy (European Union, 2026). Interacting with both EU and non-EU markets would widen the scope of West Yorkshire's economy, offering a new competitive advantage. Whilst its results are still in their early stages, it is clear that West Yorkshire will no longer rely on geopolitically sensitive countries for trade. Instead, local companies can reach a wide variety of consumer bases, resources and services. Ultimately, subnational trade diplomacy has helped to create long-term economic security for West Yorkshire, heightening stability in a time of global uncertainty.

Moreover, the UK-Switzerland-Germany trade mission saw West Yorkshire facilitate warmer ties with European industry. In the same way as the previous trade mission and health-technology bridge, it still remains a recent development. However, the trade mission still highlights the importance of European trade in today's global order. It also highlights how subnational trade has proved to have consistently positive results, both regionally and nationally. With these results in mind, this raises the question of increasing local government's devolved power to navigate global markets.

China & Defence

The region of West Yorkshire has been increasingly seeking out partnership opportunities with China. The region specialises in exporting services to the main Asian markets (Rickayzen, 2025). A strong relationship with China is perceived to be an essential component to the Leeds City region growth (Pattinson, 2019). China's growing middle class with a potential rise in their willingness to spend (Department for Business & Trade, 2024), provides new opportunities for businesses in the region.

The increasing trend of buying imports, particularly food and drink, provides business opportunities for those aiming for international reach (Department for Business & Trade, 2024). The West and North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce met with Chinese Consul General Tang Rui, on the 7th of November 2025 (Casci, 2025). They also emphasised that China is a location that is "increasingly on our members' minds when it comes to new markets" (Casci, 2025). China's growing market has been one to keep watch of, where the US and China are the "largest single country markets for goods exports from Leeds City Region" (Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2022). In West Yorkshire's 2022-2026 Trade Strategy, China is an export market that businesses should consider (Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2022).

This has been actioned through numerous trade missions. A delegation from Leeds city region visited Qingdao, Hangzhou, and Hong Kong to strengthen bilateral investment flows and seek out further trade opportunities (Pattinson, 2019). The region has been actively working towards attracting Chinese inward investment and promoting a 'Northern Powerhouse' campaign (Pattinson, 2019). Promoting the region, rather than individual cities has strengthened this initiative and allowed the region to compete internationally (Pattinson, 2019).

Examples include university links and Chinese firms opening offices in Leeds. Hisense, a Chinese company that is also a major investor is "among the fastest-growing companies in Yorkshire" (Pattinson, 2019). Additionally, Chinese gaming company OPE Sports became the sponsors of the Huddersfield town football team (Pattinson, 2019). Beyond this, Huddersfield-based business ConnectChina was selected to join Theresa May on a trade mission to China in 2018 (Benson, 2018).

Bradford has been central to creating cultural links with China (Pattinson, 2019). Bradford's media and film strengths have provided for a growing digital and creative sector (Pattinson, 2019). Partnerships with China have included co-productions with Chinese filmmakers, and Bradford opening a film office in Qingdao (Pattinson, 2019). Shortly after, Qingdao reciprocated this (Pattinson, 2019).

Partnerships have helped accelerate the international growth of businesses in the region. Trade missions have been the primary method of this, where a trade mission to Food and hospitality China 2024 was conducted strictly for businesses in the food and beverage industry in the North to gain exposure (Department for Business & Trade, 2024). The well-known Silver Cross business is also used as an example of this (Pattinson, 2019). However, the Silver Cross is already a well reputed business. Therefore, it must be considered whether such a level of international growth can be achieved regardless of Chinese partnership.

Regarding the defence industry, the UK has engaged in subnational trade diplomacy in this area. This relates to the region of West Yorkshire due to the impact on sector growth and job creation on the region. For example, the war in Ukraine has seen the UK increase production in their defence equipment (DES Comms, 2025). A defence company based in the region has started producing artillery barrels for the first time in approximately 2 decades (DES Comms, 2025). This increase in production to meet demand in Ukraine will provide significant support to the UK's defence industry and therefore create more jobs due to increased production requirements (DES Comms, 2025).

Additionally, the West Yorkshire's Combined Authority's 2026 international activity has planned trade missions to countries such as Germany (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). Germany is placed as a priority country to visit due to the strong effects of their cooperation within advanced manufacturing and the potential export market opportunities for businesses in the region (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). The UK-Germany MoU already provided increased opportunities due to new bridging equipment (Pollard, 2025), reflecting a strengthening defence partnership between the two states.

As outlined in the 2026 international activity document, strengthening these ties is perfect for "positioning West Yorkshire as a key partner in the Government's growth mission" (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). Being West Yorkshire's 2nd largest export partner, Germany is a country in which 47% of businesses in West Yorkshire plan to expand their reach into and access new markets (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). Baden-Wurttemberg is an incredibly strong and innovative economic state within Germany (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025). Both regions are pursuing growth that is innovative and green, providing further opportunity for collaboration (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2025).

The defence industry directly supported approximately 3750 jobs in Yorkshire and the Humber (Mahmood, 2025). However, in comparison to the Southwest and East with figures at 43,500 and 41,740 respectively, the impact on the North is relatively minimal (Mahmood, 2025). This is also seen with the new UK-Poland treaty focused on military partnership and "securing energy supplies" (West, 2025). Benefits of the treaty's defence industry partnership is again concentrated in the south. This is with the "opening of a UK-Poland Joint Programme Office in Bristol" with collaborators MBDA in the UK and PGZ, a Polish defence firm (West, 2025).

Former UK Prime Minister Theresa May with US President Donald J. Trump (Wikimedia Commons)

Conclusion

From the analysis in this paper, it is clear that subnational diplomacy has produced real yet limited benefits for the UK in the post-Brexit period. With the WYCA case study, it can be seen that trade missions and international partnerships can attract investment, support exports and foster sectoral development despite the lack of formal treaty powers for devolved mayors. Altogether they appear to have been reasonably effective in attracting FDI and connecting local firms to the markets overseas.

However, this paper also finds that the effects of subnational diplomacy should not be overstated. Data analysis does not provide evidence that supports the idea that subnational openness alone can significantly drive export or GDP growth and wider benefits remain constrained by limited regional powers, institutional fragmentation and broader macroeconomic conditions. WYCA's activities have been promising but have ultimately been piecemeal.

CAs remain dependent on the central government for formal trade negotiations and the institutional framework through which they operate. Consequently, subnational diplomacy becomes reactive rather than proactive with integration into long-term policy.

Subnational diplomacy is therefore neither transformational nor completely dismissible. It can therefore be best used as a support for regional development and, under the right circumstances, could be significantly more effective, generating real benefits across sectors, only if backed by institutional capacity and a consistent national strategy. Therefore, both the UK government and CA's need to change from ad hoc policy and activity to a more coherent and collaborative system for regional diplomatic and trade strategy.

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