

Provincializing India's Foreign Policy: Unpacking the Local and Regional Origins of India's External Policies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how India's foreign policy, traditionally centralized in New Delhi, has become increasingly shaped by regional actors. Using insights from paradiplomacy and coalition politics, it argues that Indian states influence external affairs through both direct economic engagement—such as investment summits, diaspora diplomacy, and trade missions—and indirect political bargaining with the central government. The article aims to clarify when and how regional interests affect foreign policy-making, depending on the local salience of international issues, federal power-sharing dynamics, coalition configurations, and the central government's responsiveness. The discussion of these dynamics in illustrative case-studies shows that state-level engagement has broadened India's international footprint while introducing new political contestation. Ultimately, this study concludes that subnational diplomacy in India is expanding but remains selectively co-opted by the Centre for electoral and strategic purposes rather than becoming a completely de-centralized and inclusive process.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, Subnational diplomacy, Federalism, Regional politics, Paradiplomacy

Provincializando la política exterior de la India: desentrañando los orígenes locales y regionales de las políticas externas de la India

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo la política exterior de la India, tradicionalmente centralizada en Nueva Delhi, ha sido moldeada cada vez más por actores regionales. Utilizando perspectivas de la paradiplomacia y la política de coalición, se argumenta que los estados

indios influyen en los asuntos externos tanto a través de la participación económica directa —como cumbres de inversión, diplomacia de la diáspora y misiones comerciales— como de la negociación política indirecta con el gobierno central. El artículo busca a aclarar cuándo y cómo los intereses regionales afectan la formulación de políticas exteriores, dependiendo de la relevancia local de los asuntos internacionales, la dinámica de reparto de poder federal, las configuraciones de coalición y la capacidad de respuesta del gobierno central. El análisis de estas dinámicas en estudios de caso ilustrativos muestra que la participación a nivel estatal ha ampliado la presencia internacional de la India, a la vez que ha introducido nuevas contiendas políticas. En definitiva, este estudio concluye que la diplomacia subnacional en la India se está expandiendo, pero sigue siendo cooptada selectivamente por el gobierno central con fines electorales y estratégicos, en lugar de convertirse en un proceso completamente descentralizado e inclusivo.

Palabras clave: Política exterior india, diplomacia subnacional, federalismo, política regional, paradiplomacia

印度外交政策的地方化：剖析印度对外政策的地方和区域渊源

摘要

本文探讨了传统上由新德里方面主导的印度外交政策如何日益受到区域和地方行动者的影响。文章运用准外交和联盟政治的见解，论证了印度各邦如何通过直接的经济参与（例如投资峰会、侨民外交和贸易代表团）以及与中央政府的间接政治博弈来影响对外事务。本文旨在构建一个类型学，阐明区域利益何时以及如何影响外交政策的制定，这取决于国际问题在地方层面的重要性、联邦权力分享动态、联盟结构以及中央政府的响应能力。通过案例研究，对这些动态的探讨表明，邦级参与扩大了印度的国际影响力，同时也引入了新的政治竞争。最终，本文得出结论：印度的地方外交正在扩展，但中央政府出于选举和战略目的对其进行选择性利用，而非成为一个完全去中心化的包容性过程。

关键词：印度外交政策，地方外交，联邦制，区域政治，准外交

Historically, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK) have competed for the control of the legislative assembly in Tamil Nadu, a southern Indian state, by emphasizing their traditional support for the welfare of the Tamil minority in neighbouring Sri Lanka (Jones 2012). This has led successive chief ministers of Tamil Nadu to lobby for the “Tamil cause” in New Delhi and, at times, indirectly influencing the central government’s policies towards Sri Lanka. This explains why the case of Tamil Nadu is generally one of the most visible examples in the literature on subnational diplomacy in India (Plagemann and Destradi 2015; Sridharan 2003).

However, this empirical focus on the Tamil case has led this scholarship to overlook the more diverse set of subnational foreign policy issues, as well as other types of direct diplomatic engagement by Indian states, including from those that are not strategically located border states. For instance, the portfolio of Tamil Nadu’s subnational diplomacy has expanded over the last decade to a wide range of international issues like trade, investment, science, medicine, and climate change. Foreign economic interests have directly materialized in the regular organisation of the Tamil Nadu’s Global Investors Meet (*Times of India* 2024), and regular meetings between the state’s chief minister with foreign governments in Chennai or through visits to Dubai, Singapore, Japan, Spain, and the US to attract foreign direct investment to the state (Sivapriyan 2024). This is illustrative

of a broader trend of foreign economic outreach of other states which have regularly organized investor summits to gain foreign investments (Jacob 2016).

These instances of indirect foreign policy making, through bypassing central governments and promoting subnational interests directly on the international arena, or indirectly, through influencing the central government’s foreign policy decisions, are a significant development. Traditionally, Indian foreign policy-making was assumed to be strongly centralized and the preoccupation of a limited group of political and bureaucratic elites in New Delhi. In addition, Indian policymakers have long presumed a lack of interest or knowledge about foreign policy matters of regional politicians.

The economic and diplomatic outreach of Indian states has increased over the last three decades. Paradoxically, this has also been encouraged by the central Indian government through the creation in 2014 of the “States Division” in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), notably to facilitate states’ international cooperation in coordination with Indian embassies abroad. As India is expected to continue to rise materially, with a polity and society that will be more engaged with the global sphere at all levels, the interplay between diverse domestic—especially regional—politics and foreign policy is set to grow. Yet, the last decade has also coincided with the centralization of policy-making because of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) one-party majority in parliament, and its political control in a majority

of Indian states (Kailash 2019; Sharma and Swenden 2022).

Consequently, one can also expect foreign policy-making to become an even more contested political space (Markey 2022). It seems evident that some foreign policy decisions, such as signing trade deals, dealing with illegal and forced migration, or negotiating infrastructure and resource-sharing with neighbouring countries, can disproportionately affect specific Indian states. For instance, as witnessed in India's FTA negotiations with both the US and the EU, India's rural regions have expressed concerns about exposing their agricultural sectors to international competition. Similarly, India's coastal regions have long-term cultural and commercial connections with neighbouring regions which they want to see acknowledged and protected through bilateral and multilateral trade deals.

Despite this local salience of international and transnational issues, we still do not know enough about how *regional actors* influence India's foreign policy decisions. Specifically, we still do not know *when, in which ways, and to what extent* Indian states become involved in foreign policy-making process(es). In other words, when and why do Indian states develop direct diplomatic ties with transnational or international entities? When do they try to shape India's foreign policy decisions at the centre, and if so, through which formal or informal channels?

Building upon insights from the scholarship on federalism and paradiplomacy and the coalition politics of

foreign policy-making, notably in a multinational democratic federation like India, this article aims to theorize the conditions under which Indian states shape foreign policy. The nature of Indian state influence over foreign policy depends mainly on three factors: (a) the regional salience of foreign policy issues; (b) the formal and informal leverage that states hold on the central government; and (c) the central government's own strategies of politicization of foreign policy strategies. The article therefore suggests that the interplay of these factors lead to varying causal paths through which Indian states can affect India's foreign policies.

The remainder of the article is organized in four sections. First, it offers a review of the literature which has looked at how political and economic developments of the past three decades have led to increased regional and local participation in India's foreign policy-making process. In the second section, the paper suggests a theory to account for *when* and *how* some Indian states have gradually shaped Indian foreign policy. The third section briefly presents some case-studies to illustrate the causal dynamics at play. Finally, the article concludes with some discussion of the findings and future research directions.

The Path(s) to Decentralization of Indian Foreign Policy

Historically, foreign policy in India has been heavily centralized. The Indian Constitution envisaged and only made space for a federal structure with a unitary bias.

The Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists items 10 through 16 pertaining to foreign policy, including “diplomatic, consular and trade representation” and “participation in international conferences and associations,” as falling within the exclusive competence of the central government. The distribution of legislative powers between the Union and the States was envisaged in the Indian Constitution (Article 246), emphasizing that the Union government is competent to legislate in foreign affairs; diplomatic, consular, and trade representation; participation in international conferences; entering into treaties and agreements with foreign countries and implementation of treaties, agreements, and conventions with foreign countries; and foreign jurisdiction and trade and commerce with foreign countries (Tillin 2019). Furthermore, India’s initial partition and conflict with Pakistan, coupled with the initial concerns of internal fragmentation and implosion, led to the crafting of a federal polity with a clear unitary bias, notably when it came to foreign and security policies in the immediate neighborhood.

Federalism and Paradiplomacy

Despite this apparent clear-cut division of competencies, India’s Union government has faced indirect and direct resistance from states over the last 30 years when trying to push its foreign policies. A first wave of scholars has argued that the process of economic liberalization initiated in the early 1990s had gradually given leverage to Indian states to oppose the central govern-

ment’s foreign economic policies (Jenkins 2003; Sharma and Swenden 2018). Furthermore, since states have engaged in direct economic negotiations with external entities (foreign governments, private economic actors, or international economic organisations) over the last three decades, they have developed economic interests and stakes with specific regions and international partners (Asthana and Jacob 2019).

To better trace these developments at a theoretical level, some insights were gained from scholarship studying the influence of political decentralisation of political power and federal arrangements on foreign policy-making (Cantir 2024; Aldecoa and Keating 1999; Lecours 2002; Michelmann 2009). Some studies have therefore demonstrated that federal units can have an input on foreign economic policies towards neighbouring countries, especially if these are bordering states with strong transborder commercial ties (Barua 2020; Jacob 2016; Chattopadhyay and Debnath 2024). Studies have notably looked at how states which introduced economic reforms to attract foreign investments like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal have become politically more assertive and tried to exercise influence over foreign economic policy decisions (Bajpai and Sachs 1999; Kennedy 2013). These states have managed to develop their own external relations in the context of economic liberalization and globalization over the past three decades, as well as when constitutional arrangements accommodate some power-sharing possibilities and/or remain ambiguous over the distribution

of competences over foreign policy. An important conceptual clarification here is that paradiplomacy refers to the foreign policy activities and diplomatic engagements adopted by subnational entities of a sovereign state *in parallel to* the foreign policy activities of the national governments (Duchacek 1984). As expected by this literature, economic, diaspora, and cultural interests were key motivators for subnational engagement.

In the post-liberalization phase of the 1990s, Indian states have explored economic opportunities to facilitate foreign investments towards their state. These engagements have taken the form of hosting investment summits, leading economic missions to attract foreign investments, and signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with foreign governments in the last few decades. The union government still controls foreign economic policies but has generally facilitated these states' activities as long as subnational policies were not perceived to be too divergent from the national policies. The union government has in fact actively encouraged states to compete with each other in attracting and enhancing foreign investments (Jain and Maini 2017).

For instance, the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, Chandra Babu Naidu and SM Krishna, respectively, were pioneers in the field of economic paradiplomacy, initially reaping the benefits of the information technology boom in the mid-1990s (Jain and Maini 2017; Wyatt 2017). State governments have been gradually more proactive in sending and hosting inter-

national delegations from foreign states and intergovernmental organizations (Sharma 2017; Vadlamannati 2012). Chief ministers have also led Indian delegations to bilateral talks and international conferences. Naidu notably led an Indian business delegation to China in 2015 for boosting bilateral cooperation. Similarly, the former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Prithviraj Chavan, led the Indian delegation to participate in the World Economic Forum in 2014 (Bywalec 2018). Likewise, foreign government officials and private economic actors have also adapted to the federal nature of the country's politics (Stancati 2012). Foreign governments like the US, France, and Israel have begun setting up foreign trade offices across India to directly negotiate with states over trade and investment issues before seeking approval from the Centre (Jha 2014).

The opportunities for states to develop their own economic and development diplomacy strategies were also the result of international developments such as India's World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments, since its accession to the organization in 1995. Some of the rules contained in the WTO agreements related to agriculture and related sectors, which fell within the exclusive executive competence of the states in India (Jha 2014). In the late 1990s, the central Indian government was criticized for not consulting the states before accepting the treaty commitments. Some states, such as West Bengal, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu, even took the central government to court for having made international commitments on issues where it lacks

authority (Jenkins 2003). Consequently, the central government, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, convened a “Chief Ministers Conference on the WTO” in 2001 to address the grievances and reservations of Indian states regarding their commitments under the WTO agreement (Natarajan 2019).

However, the scope of paradiplomacy arguments is limited to situations where explicit institutional conditions enable subnational authorities to directly develop their own transnational networks, both bilaterally and multilaterally, with similar political or cultural sub-units in other states (Cantir 2024). In most cases, these transnational opportunities for Indian states have emerged in areas of low politics such as education, healthcare, climate change, waste management, culture, tourism, and transportation. Furthermore, this scholarship cannot adequately explain situations when state interests seem to directly conflict with foreign policy positions held by the central government and does not suggest mechanisms to understand how these conflicts are resolved and translated into specific foreign policy positions (Blarel 2019; Sharma, Destradi, and Plagemann 2020).

Coalition Politics and Regional Parties

More recent scholarship has looked at the growing importance of regional parties in foreign policy debates because of the emergence of coalition politics. Historically, the literature on partisanship and foreign policy-making in India has concentrated on ideological de-

bates between the national parties—the Indian National Congress (INC) and the BJP—and has not systematically integrated the foreign policy preferences of subnational actors (Friedrichs 2019; Narang and Staniland 2012; Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Sagar 2014). This was mainly due to the assumption that Indian foreign policy was a centralised and exclusive prerogative of the central government. However, after 1989 the INC lost its political majority, and smaller regional parties gained more seats in the national parliament. Some scholars have therefore investigated how regional parties which have joined (or supported) ruling coalitions have been actively involved in foreign policy-making at the national level (Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sasikumar and Verniers 2013; Wyatt 2017).

While initial studies assessing the role of coalition politics on Indian foreign policy-making had insisted upon the institutional and political constraints of coalitions, which supposedly led to foreign policy conservatism (Mazumdar 2011; Sridharan 2003), more recent scholarship has demonstrated how particular configurations of federalism and coalition politics can help explain how regional parties, which usually run and control many seats in state assemblies, but are minor players in national parliament, can influence foreign policy decisions (Blarel 2019; Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sharma, Destradi, and Plagemann 2020). The regional political parties have gradually realized the importance of their presence in the coalition for the continuity of the government. In such circumstances, states'

bargaining power has begun to increase, and the regional parties have started raising their voices on every issue related to their interest, including foreign policy formulation and implementation, which later enabled them to engage in the issues of cross-border relevance (Chattopadhyay and Debnath 2024).

One key finding has been that political parties, both central and regional, play an important role in the design of foreign policies, in both direct and indirect ways. Depending on institutional and situational conditions, there are varying opportunity structures for skillful state leadership to exploit the weak spots of the governing central government to push their own foreign policy preferences, or to get other policy and/or electoral concessions from the central government. However, some studies also showed that central governments and national parties can also, under specific institutional and regional situations, mobilize wider coalitions, including small state parties that had not traditionally been involved in foreign policy debates, to support their foreign policy agendas, including radical foreign policy change such as the US nuclear deal in 2008 (Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sasikumar and Verniers 2013). The central government can therefore garner approval for its own foreign policy preferences by building *quid pro quo* (or logrolling) coalitions and offering policy and electoral support in state assembly elections for regional parties in return for their vote on a foreign policy decision.

As a result, one recommendation from the scholarship has been to

further tease out whether the chances of a central government pushing its own foreign policy preferences can be actually increased by the existence of large pool of potential regional party partners with limited foreign policy interest, as one would expect in the context of political fragmentation. Counter-intuitively, while we would expect a strong central government to be able to push its own foreign policy initiatives, irrespective of states' opposition, there seem to be conditions under which a weak central government can proactively engage and co-opt states through building and changing its political coalition in exchange for electoral payoffs.

Thereby, given these gaps in the paradiplomacy and coalition scholarships, this paper offers to integrate the findings discussed here into a comprehensive theoretical framework accounting for *when and how* Indian states can have an influence on the central government's foreign policy decisions.

The Different Opportunities for Indian States to Shape Foreign Policy

Given the developments discussed earlier, this article teases out the conditions under which Indian states are more likely to influence or shape Indian foreign policy. This section theorizes that state influence on Indian foreign policy is determined by the interplay of three concurrent dynamics: the regional salience of foreign policy, the degree of coalitional pressures, and central government agency (Table 1).

Table 1: Regional Preferences, Coalition Politics, Central government strategies, and Foreign Policy Outcomes in India

	<i>Coalitional Pressure: Low</i>	<i>Coalitional Pressure: High</i>
<i>Regional salience: Low</i>	<p><i>I – Centralized Control</i></p> <p>Low political and electoral salience + stable coalition dominated by a national party.</p> <p>No concessions to regional party in a state.</p>	<p><i>III – Logrolling</i></p> <p>Low political and electoral salience + coalitional fragility.</p> <p>Side-payments or concessions (such as electoral agreement for state assembly elections) made to a regional party in a state in exchange for support on a central government foreign policy initiative.</p>
<i>Regional salience: High</i>	<p><i>II – Symbolic Inclusion</i></p> <p>High political and electoral salience + stable national coalition dominated by a national party.</p> <p>No or limited concessions to regional parties in one state. Concessions motivated by long-term electoral considerations in a state, not because of immediate coalitional pressure.</p>	<p><i>IV – Substantive Concessions</i></p> <p>High political and electoral salience + coalition fragility</p> <p>Strong policy shifts to appease the concerns of a regional in a state.</p>

Source: Author

Regional Salience of Foreign Policy

A growing scholarship has begun to scrutinize how public opinion, public salience, institutional differences, and diversity of institutional representation can affect India's foreign policy decision-making (Hinton and Vaishnav 2023; Kapur 2009; Milliff et al. 2019). However, most of these studies have focused on urban elite circles to make broader claims about the national salience of some foreign policy issues.

This paper argues that some small, but spatially concentrated, constituencies have held informed and committed preferences—often expressed through the intermediary of various state-level representatives, whether regional parties or Chief Ministers—over time and over specific foreign policy issues. Variation in regional preferences on foreign policy can be explained through the geographical distribution of economic and/or cultural interests relative to for-

eign policy issues. States have therefore been more likely to engage with foreign policy when external issues have had a direct local impact, notably over issues of border security, diaspora ties, culture/ethnic links, but also when these state governments perceive economic opportunities abroad. States, notably bordering states like West Bengal, the Northeastern states, or coastal states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, are more likely to assert influence when foreign policy issues directly affect their economy or security, such as trade with neighboring states, issues of cross-border legal and illegal migration, maritime or fishing access, or access to shared resources like river basins.

Other regional political actors have had societal, economic and electoral pressures and incentives to engage with diaspora connections, like Kerala and Punjab with their substantial expatriate communities based respectively in the Gulf states and Canada. Some other states' or territories' interests abroad intersect with transnational ethnic politics, like Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka, West Bengal and Bangladesh, Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan, or Northeastern states with Myanmar or China. For instance, two regional parties in India (DMK and AIADMK) have held consistent and enduring preferences over India's relationship with Sri Lanka, notably over transnational ethnic solidarity with the Tamil minority. Finally, some central government policies have a direct impact on states' economies and become a salient issue regionally. For instance, Northeastern states have tried to benefit from con-

nectivity opportunities emerging from India's participation in various trans-regional initiatives like the Look East and Act East policies and the "Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation" (BIM-STEAC) (Ray Chaudhury and Ghosh 2022). However, strongly expressed and enduring preferences by regional political actors are not sufficient to shape the central government's foreign policy. For states to shape foreign policy, directly or indirectly, institutional opportunities and reactions from the central government are also necessary.

Multi-level Coalitions and Foreign Policy-making

Building on insights from the scholarship on the coalition politics of foreign policy-making and the study of regional and coalition politics in India cited in the earlier sections, this article argues that the combination of the interest of regional representation in specific foreign policy issues and the prevailing coalitional configuration in place (whether the national government is engaged in coalitional power-sharing arrangements with regional parties at the national and/or state-levels) can also determine the extent to which regional parties are able to shape foreign policy decisions in India.

This study builds on recent foreign policy analysis scholarship which has explained variation in foreign policy outcomes between different types of coalition governments (Kaarbo 2012). Some scholars notably demonstrated that coalition-building configurations facilitate the inclusion of concerns of

small parties in foreign policy decisions (Easley and Kaarbo 2014). For instance, small parties can sometimes threaten to withdraw their support (and possibly to defect from the coalition) to disproportionately shape foreign policy. Following on these theorized mechanisms, this article suggests concentrating on the specific patterns of political bargaining in multi-party coalitions.

Strong regional salience on a foreign policy issue is not a sufficient condition to observe state influence on foreign policy. Strong foreign policy preferences and opposition from state parties only lead to a reaction from the Central government if these disagreements are likely to bring electoral costs. Narang and Staniland have argued that the shifting electoral salience of foreign policy issues and the clarity of responsibility for policy outcomes combined in various ways to generate different accountability environments in which Indian politicians operate (Narang and Staniland 2019). In accordance with this insight, the argument here is that regionally concentrated parties can pressure the national leadership and thereby influence foreign policy decisions through specific coalitional configurations.

Building on the extensive scholarship on the effects of India's experience with coalitions on its domestic politics (Adeney and Saez 2015; Chakrabarty 2014; Kailash 2014; Nooruddin 2010; Ruparelia 2015; Sridharan 2012, 2014), one can observe the growing influence at the national level of a multitude of state-level political parties which have

virtually performed as kingmakers in the tenuous coalition governments that were formed at the national level from 1989 to 2014 (Sridharan 2014; Ziegfeld 2016; Wyatt 2019). The two largest national parties, the INC, and since 1998, the BJP, have had to build large coalitions which included many smaller parties. These coalitions were also further cemented if one of these two national parties has also established electoral alliances at the state-level with regional parties. In effect, this creates what Sridharan has coined "mutual electoral interdependencies" between the national and state parties, making it difficult for either of them to withdraw backing without running the risk of losing their electoral support in national- or state-level assembly polls (Sridharan 2014).

Therefore, coalition-building arrangements following both national and regional elections (visible in federal settings) create locked-in alliances between national and state parties. Unlike traditional West European cases of intra-coalitional bargaining, it is important in the Indian context to not exclusively concentrate on the number of seats in the national parliament for each party present in cabinet but to also look at electoral arrangements negotiated at the state level with regional parties. Coalitions are not only formed in national parliaments but also within state assemblies, creating multi-level coalitions, thereby making it necessary for national parties to consider the concerns of a wider number of electoral partners when designing policies, and under some conditions, foreign policies.

Consequently, the particular institutional features of the Indian federal political system have created the phenomenon of mutual electoral interdependencies or “locked-in supporters,” which have led to specific structural constraints and opportunities for national and regional parties to shape the policy agenda of a governing coalition at the center (Sridharan 2014). As national parties build coalitions or electoral alliances with regional parties both within the national and state assemblies, they are bound by agreements that might give a disproportionate amount of leverage to regional parties to shape foreign policy. Depending on salience of specific foreign policy issues, we can also determine how varying levels of coalitional pressures are used by state parties. Within these centre–state negotiation dynamics, it is therefore important to distinguish substantial foreign policy concessions—direct input on the nature of the foreign policy issue—from “side-payments,” i.e., concessions that are not directly related to the substance of the foreign policy decision, such as promises of policy benefits for state parties’ local constituencies or of electoral support at the state assembly level. Four possible outcomes result from different combinations of regional preference and coalitional configuration as summarized in Table 1.

However, as shown by Blarel and Willigen (2021), the interlocking multi-level coalitional mechanisms can work in both directions. In some cases, regional parties might depend on support from the national parties in their state assembly elections and have there-

fore been constrained in their capacity to pressure the agenda of the national government, even if they had the seats in the national parliament to be a pivotal coalition player. The center–state coalition dynamics are therefore complicated by the central government’s own strategies.

Central Government’s Response(s) and Agency

The central government’s foreign policy doctrine and leadership style play a crucial role in either enabling or constraining state influence. Most of the time, the central government can use constitutional authority and sideline states’ views. This centralized approach was visible until the early 1990s. However, given the twin pressures of decentralized foreign economic power and coalitional politics, the central government has had to increasingly delegate or collaborate with state governments as discussed in the previous sections. This has led to reluctant and selective accommodation of states if there are electoral costs, or when the central government sees practical benefits to coordinate policies. One possible instance of accommodation is the Modi government’s coordination and consultation in 2018 with the state government of Punjab—led by a political opponent, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh—over the establishment of the Kartarpur corridor, despite the BJP holding a strong single-party majority in the national parliament. The corridor was intended to facilitate the travel of Sikh pilgrims from the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara in Pakistan, the final resting place of Guru

Nanak Dev, to Dera Baba Nanak in India (Dhaliwal 2025).

However, central governments and national parties can also use various strategies to partly accommodate regional concerns and mobilize coalitions to support their own foreign policy agendas, notably by including small regional parties that had not traditionally been involved in foreign policy debates. This can be done through inclusive federal diplomacy, where the Centre consults or co-opts states formally or informally. For example, Narendra Modi's own success in conducting paradiplomacy as Chief Minister of Gujarat also prompted him to promote subnational economic diplomacy in his 2014 national election campaign, where he repeatedly underlined the need for greater involvement of states in India's foreign policy (Bywalec 2018). After Modi became prime minister, the Ministry of External Affairs created the "States Division" in 2014 to facilitate direct coordination between the ministry and subnational units on matters relating to external relations and diplomacy (Tewari 2017). The objective of the new division was to "promote exports, tourism and attract more overseas investment and expertise," notably through the provision of training and capacity building assistance to states and Union Territories in areas relating to external linkages such as trade and investments (PTI 2014). The States Division has also assisted Indian states in identifying target states and regions to engage in commercial and cultural diplomacy (Jacob 2016).

Another important strategy used by the center is the offer of side-payments as mentioned in the previous section. These are concessions from the central government to regional parties that are not directly related to the substance of the foreign policy debate. For instance, in the context of the US–India nuclear debate in 2008 as discussed by Blarel and Willignen (2021), the central government was able to garner approval at the central level for its foreign policy preferences by offering policy and electoral support to a state party in return for its support on a foreign policy decision in the national parliament. The INC-led central government in New Delhi offered electoral support to the Samajwadi Party (SP) in the following regional elections in the state of Uttar Pradesh to secure its key vote in the contested nuclear deal vote in 2008. This case also proved to be a scenario with more than one regional coalition partner that the INC could negotiate with to maintain its national coalition. In this particular case and institutional configuration, the inherent weaknesses of the central government enabled it to proactively seek outside support and rebuild its coalition in exchange for policy and electoral payoffs. As a result, the combined effect of low local salience, high coalitional pressure, and strong political willingness of the central government to push a foreign policy initiative gave it an upper hand in shaping and implementing the policy agenda.

Foreign Policy Influence of Tamil Nadu before and after 2014

One of the scope conditions of the arguments on coalition politics and India's foreign policy is that this mechanism is solely visible in multiparty governance. Therefore, it remains an empirical question whether the interactive effects of regional salience and coalitional arrangements are useful to explain Indian foreign policy decisions both before and after the 1989–2014 period of coalition governance. Can this framework for instance help explain India's external behavior from 2014 to 2024, when India has been ruled *de facto* by a single party central government, the BJP? To test the causal dynamics developed above, this article looks at the influence from one state, Tamil Nadu, over India's policies towards Sri Lanka over time and varying configurations of coalitional pressure. As mentioned above, the Tamil Nadu case is an oft-cited example of subnational influence but most of the evidence of Tamil Nadu pressure on the foreign policy of the central government remains based on anecdotal evidence or is overdetermined. The political pressure from Tamil Nadu is taken as a constant and there is little indication of *when* and *why* this pressure does impact Indian foreign policy. Specifically, the two selected case studies look at India's stance over the Tamil minority in neighboring Sri Lanka before and after 2014 and focus more explicitly on India's United Nations Human Right Council (UNHRC) votes on Sri Lanka

in 2012, 2013, 2014, and in 2021. In the two cases, there is a strong regional salience of the issue of the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka, but there were varying levels of coalitional pressures and central government strategies.

As mentioned above, India's relations with Sri Lanka have long been politically sensitive in Tamil Nadu, where public opinion strongly supports Sri Lankan Tamil rights and is critical of Colombo's treatment of Tamil civilians during and after the civil war. The two major regional parties competing for the control of the regional assembly in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the DMK and the AIADMK, have historically been also competing to pose as the most ardent champion of the welfare of the neighboring Indian-origin Tamil population in Sri Lanka. This foreign policy issue of ethnic solidarity has been salient for successive state elections since the 1970s.

This issue has also influenced coalition-building discussions between national and Tamil Nadu parties since 1989. The growing need for political support of Tamil parties in national coalitions have led the Indian governments to opt for a more interventionist policy in Sri Lankan affairs. In 2012, the US brought to vote a resolution at the UNHCR, encouraging Sri Lanka to conduct an independent and credible investigation into alleged war crimes in the final stages of the Sri Lankan offensives to quell the LTTE insurgency (Cumming-Bruce 2012). At that time, and based on the theoretical conditions cited above, the coalitional configura-

tion and pressure was in favor of the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu as it did not need to court the INC for electoral support in state elections and could leverage its parliamentary support at the national level. The DMK therefore directly threatened to withdraw its support to the central government coalition if it did not vote against Sri Lanka (NDTV 2012). As a result, the central Indian government chose to break with its traditional practice of not voting for country-specific motions, especially with regard to interference in domestic politics, and it voted in favor of the resolution (Narain 2017). Nevertheless, given Indian concerns over China's growing economic and political influence in Sri Lanka, it also qualified its support by suggesting that the Sri Lankan government had to give its prior approval to international inspections.

The US sponsored a stronger UNHCR resolution in 2013 and the DMK demanded this time that India amend the resolution to explicitly condemn the Sri Lankan government of genocide and war crimes. The DMK was pressured to act by its local rival at the regional level, the AIDMK, which had passed a resolution in the state assembly requesting the central government to break ties with Sri Lanka. No agreement was reached within the national coalition over an appropriate response on the part of the Indian government, but a series of central government ministers condemned Sri Lanka's treatment of the Tamil population and India voted for the resolution. These rhetorical accusations failed to satisfy the DMK, which chose to follow up this

time on its threats to withdraw from the national coalition in March 2013 without, however, destabilizing the coalition. The DMK effectively maintained its external parliamentary support to the national coalition (Sivani 2013). The coalitional configuration, therefore, pressured the Indian government to make key concessions such as the vote at the UNHCR and the decision of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to skip the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting organized in 2013 in Colombo.

However, by 2014, conscious that relations with the Sri Lankan government were deteriorating and encouraging China's push for more influence in Colombo, the central government decided to again modify its voting policy. This was made possible by a shift in the coalitional configuration—the DMK had effectively withdrawn its support from the coalition and the INC had actively been looking for other coalitional allies. Freed from the pressures of any electoral agreement with the DMK, the central government was less concerned about pro-Tamil demands and tried to mend ties with the Sri Lankan government. India therefore abstained from voting against Sri Lanka in the UNHRC vote in 2014 (Asthana and Jacob 2019).

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, emboldened by a stable single majority in the national parliament which could effectively insulate it from Tamil parties' pressures, the central government signaled a willingness to rebuild ties with the Mahinda Rajapaksa government, and later with

President Maithripala Sirisena, emphasizing connectivity, security cooperation, and regional diplomacy. In a 2021 UNHRC vote, India abstained and used blended diplomatic language rather than an outright vote condemning Colombo (Srinivasan 2021). At the time of the vote, the BJP was in a formal electoral alliance with the AIADMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, and state elections in Tamil Nadu were only weeks away. The AIADMK has historically taken strong positions defending Sri Lankan Tamils. For the BJP—which had a comfortable majority at the center and has limited electoral traction in the state—the alliance made it crucial not to alienate Tamil Nadu voters or undermine AIADMK’s political standing. This political context shaped the content and tone of India’s diplomatic messaging. In its explanation of vote at the UNHRC, India emphasized the need for Sri Lanka to ensure “meaningful devolution” and “credible commitments to reconciliation”—language aligned with long-standing Tamil Nadu demands. At the same time, New Delhi avoided a direct vote against Sri Lanka, which could have strained strategic relations and counterterrorism cooperation.

The abstention thus functioned as a balancing act, designed to preserve bilateral ties with Colombo while signaling responsiveness to Tamil concerns important for the AIADMK alliance. The AIADMK urged the central government to vote in favor of the UNHRC resolution, calling it a “moral duty” to support Sri Lankan Tamils, but did not explicitly India’s abstention

(*New Indian Express* 2021). By contrast, the DMK condemned India’s abstention and claimed India had failed Sri Lankan Tamils. Even a former INC Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, representing a Tamil Nadu constituency, called the abstention a “betrayal of Tamils everywhere,” criticized the central government for prioritizing strategic concerns over justice for Sri Lankan Tamils, and urged voters to “punish the AIADMK–BJP alliance” in the 2021 Assembly elections (*Financial Express* 2021).

Tamil Nadu’s opposition also affected implementation of foreign policy decisions on the ground. For example, the central government had to take a more careful stance on fisheries negotiations between India and Sri Lanka, as Tamil Nadu fishermen regularly clashed with the Sri Lankan Navy (Moorthy 2024). State-level protests and political pressure pushed the Modi government to adopt a more hardline rhetorical position towards Sri Lanka and offer additional welfare and legal support to the fishermen. This slowed or complicated New Delhi’s efforts to negotiate a long-term bilateral solution favored by Sri Lanka.

While in a favorable coalitional configuration, the Modi government was nevertheless aware of the regional salience of these issues and the potential repercussions ahead of national and state elections, especially for coalitional partners in the state in the AIADMK. This led the central government to only symbolically support the positions of its partner in Tamil Nadu (as expected

in outcome II in Table 1). In addition, another consideration (also expected in Table 1) was the BJP's long term electoral aims in Tamil Nadu in both national and state assembly seats. Given this other state-level electoral consideration, it was important for the BJP to avoid appearing too indifferent to Tamil concerns about Sri Lankan Tamil rights. This created a strong incentive for policy sensitivity, even if the party's actual electoral prospects remain modest, and that it still pursued a rapprochement with Sri Lanka.

The BJP's calibrated approach—such as India's abstentions at the UNHCR, repeated calls for Tamil reconciliation in Sri Lanka, and public pressure on Colombo regarding arrests of Tamil Nadu fishermen—reflects the party's need to avoid alienating voters in Tamil Nadu. Overall, the Tamil Nadu–Sri Lanka case shows how subnational politics meaningfully shaped Indian foreign policy under Modi despite the absence of formal state-level authority in external affairs. Domestic political pressures, particularly in electorally significant states with strong identity-based foreign policy preferences, can force New Delhi to recalibrate, delay, soften, or even at times break with its diplomatic stance as with the 2012 UNHCR vote. This demonstrates that India's foreign policy—while centralized—remains embedded in decentralized political dynamics that can constrain, influence, or redirect central decision-making on sensitive regional issues.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Indian states can shape the country's foreign policy in several ways. In the case studies above, the three dimensions (local salience, coalition dynamics, and central government agency) interact in complex ways to explain the varying success of Tamil parties' pressures on the central governments over time. The study of coalitional configurations shows that even in votes in multilateral forums like the UNHCR, long an unfettered function of the national government, are increasingly politicized and contested. Another recent example of traditional core task of the national government of defending national security, state sovereignty, and of pursuing the "national interest," which saw pushback from states was the implementation of the National Register of Citizens, which was criticized by 11 states. While the National Register of Citizens is a legislation passed by the central government, the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal found themselves at odds over the shared common boundary and the issue of illegal and/or non-Indian citizens. It remains to be carefully studied how this national policy has affected the BJP's electoral fate in some of these bordering states.

Moving forward, the case studies also show some dynamics which might not be explicitly visible in the 2x2 framework summarized in Table 1. For instance, the coalitional bargaining strategies of the central government to support its foreign policy initiatives or to counter state-led pressures need to be

further theorized. As shown in the case studies, the INC and the BJP found ways to insulate their coalitions from pressures coming from state parties. Also, the case studies seemed to show that timing matters. We should notably expect to see possible bargaining processes between the BJP and coalition allies, notably as we approach national and state elections, when multi-level coalitional pressure opens up leverage possibilities for junior partners and regional parties. This is an implicit assumption in the current theoretical argument which would need to be clearly hypothesized and tested in further works.

Similarly, in these electoral contexts, the impact of Indian states on foreign policy can also run both ways. Electoral considerations at the state level can also push the central government to politicize foreign policy issues which were only salient at a state level, even when these seem to contradict national security interests. The increasing politicization of foreign policy issues in regional politics can help explain why Prime Minister Modi criticized in 2024 the INC for ceding the Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka in 1974. For many observers and former diplomats, this long negotiated development was politicized by the governing BJP to gain votes in Tamil Nadu where it had previously failed to make any electoral gains (see the discussion in the previous section) (Haidar 2024). As a result, it seems that the inclusion of states' interests is more likely when it serves the central government's domestic political objectives (e.g., electoral gains in a state), and that other efforts to include states in foreign

policy practices, as for instance the selective invitation in bilateral visit delegations or the creation of the States Division, are more performative than sincere.

Finally, this article theorized regional salience to be a critical factor to explain variation in willingness from states to influence the central government's foreign policy, but also as a potential opportunity for national parties to politicize foreign policy issues for potential electoral gains. Further research could develop a more detailed typology of issue-areas which help distinguish when states choose to shape foreign policy via coalition building and pressure or engage alternatively in parallel paradiplomatic channels. This mainly depends on whether the issue has tangible but not critical regional implications (e.g., trade sectors, migrants, cultural ties), and where states can leverage constitutional paradiplomatic powers (economic and cultural diplomacy), or, instead, whether these are issues where national economic and security interests directly contradict core state identity or economic interests (protecting co-ethnic populations, sharing of natural resources across borders).

One societal implication of this study is that subnational diplomacy is not institutionalized but seemingly co-opted in an ad-hoc fashion for electoral purposes. This politicization by the central government or by state governments with opposing views on how to deal with neighbors could notably limit India's ability to leverage subnational diplomacy in strategies towards

the region, as with Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh. As a result, these centre–state electoral dynamics and their implications for national and subnational diplomacy are an important avenue of future research and key to foster better and predictable institutional capacity-building in Indian foreign policy, especially at the interface with states.

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