

Federalising Indian Foreign Policy: When Provinces Knocked On The Door Of Diplomacy.

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Abstract

By the letter of the Seventh Schedule, the Indian states have no constitutional standing in external affairs. By the practice of the last three decades, they have become indispensable to it. This paper builds a conceptual bridge between two literatures that rarely speak to each other, Indian federalism and foreign policy analysis. It argues that the analytical vocabulary of two-level games, para-diplomacy, and constituent diplomacy, developed largely for Western federations, travels to India only with significant adaptation, because the Indian Constitution was deliberately designed to deny the states any formal diplomatic role (Singh, 2023). The paper traces the historical opening of that constitutional cage across three ruptures: the end of one-party dominance, the liberalisation shock of 1991, and the rise of competitive federalism as statecraft. It identifies five distinct faces of sub-state diplomacy, economic, border and water, diaspora, political, and urban cultural, and argues that what has emerged is not the surrender of central control but its transformation: the Centre has moved from gatekeeper to orchestrator (Jenkins, 2003; Maitra & Chatterjee, 2021). Drawing on comparative evidence from Canada, Germany, Belgium and China, the paper shows that Indian federalisation is distinctive in being constitutionally unsanctioned yet politically irreversible. It concludes by examining the costs of this unofficial federalisation, the subordination of national interest to regional electoral calendars, institutional ambiguity, and growing inter-state asymmetry, and the case for institutionalising the states within the architecture of Indian foreign policy rather than tolerating their influence as an unacknowledged drift.

Introduction: The Constitutional Silence and the De Facto Role of States

There is a stubborn contradiction at the heart of Indian foreign policy. The Constitution of India places the subject of foreign affairs, all matters that bring the Union into any relation with a foreign country or entity, squarely on the Union List, alongside diplomacy, treaties, war and peace, and trade with foreign countries. Defence, external affairs and communication are under the exclusive control of the Centre, and the states, 'as per the constitutional arrangement, do not have any powers, even to make recommendations in these areas' (Singh, 2023). The Indian Constitution 'does not give the states a defined role in foreign relations' (Wyatt, 2018).

And yet. A chief minister signs an investment memorandum in Singapore before the national flag is hoisted over the deal. Another holds a summit that hosts three heads of government. A border state demands a corridor to a shrine across the Line of Control. A state government stalls a water treaty that two nations have spent a decade negotiating. Since the mid-1990s, scholars have watched state governments 'take a greater interest in foreign relations,' seeking indirect influence by lobbying the central government and direct influence by seeking investment and making links with international organisations and other national and subnational governments (Wyatt, 2017). Regional governments pursue proactive diplomacy to invite maximum foreign direct investment, and in the era of transnationalism and economic interdependence, the states are taking the lead for inviting FDI while acting as pressure points that lobby federal officials to protect and promote their interests in the global arena (Singh, 2023).

The gap between constitutional text and political practice is the subject of this paper. Its argument is conceptual rather than empirical: it seeks to provide a coherent theoretical frame for understanding how a constitutionally unitary foreign policy has become de facto federal, and what the Indian case does to theories built elsewhere.

Theoretical Framework: Two-Level Games, Para-diplomacy and Constituent Diplomacy

The dominant framework for linking domestic politics and international behaviour remains the two-level game. Robert Putnam argued that during international negotiations, governments must simultaneously satisfy two constituencies: first, their international bargaining partners and their domestic audiences, analytically

disaggregating negotiation into Level I (between governments) and Level II (ratification at home) (Betz & Hanif, 2010). As he put it, 'domestic politics and international relations are often somehow entangled, but our theories have yet not sorted out the puzzling tangle' (Singh, 2023). The literature that grew out of this insight examined democratic structures, domestic politics, media, public opinion, pressure groups, coalition and regional politics, and the evidence is by now unambiguous. Domestic politics is crucial in determining foreign policy, particularly in federations and states that are democratically governed (Singh, 2023). National preferences, on this view, are 'formed at the foreign domestic nexus and are exposed to both outside-in and inside-out dynamics, pressures, and constraints,' forcing governments to balance international and domestic concerns in a process of double-edged diplomacy (Betz & Hanif, 2010).

A second, narrower set of concepts addresses the sub-state level directly. The genealogy runs from Duchacek's 'micro-diplomacy', border regions engaging counterpart authorities across the frontier and, in its 'global' variant, units without shared borders, through Soldatos's codification of 'para-diplomacy' as the external activity of subnational units, to Kincaid's 'constituent diplomacy,' defined as the 'international activities undertaken by the constituent governments' (Wyatt, 2018). Kincaid supplied the crucial nuance that constituent governments need no constitutional role at all: they work as pressure points on national foreign policy-making by lobbying federal officials to protect their interests (Wyatt, 2018). The terminological proliferation itself is revealing: scholars have offered 'perforated sovereignty,' 'para-diplomacy,' 'constituent diplomacy,' 'foreign policy localisation,' 'multilayered diplomacy' and 'plurinational diplomacy' to capture the same underlying process (Hazariika, 2014). In India, the term of art has shifted from para-diplomacy, which carries separatist connotations it does not deserve, to constituent diplomacy, because the states' external activity is almost entirely complementary to, rather than competitive with, the national agenda (Wyatt, 2018).

Yet there is a troubling gap in this literature, acknowledged even by its practitioners: 'While sufficient data is available for western federations and nation-states, it is scarcely available for the role of states and Indian foreign policy' (Singh, 2023). The theoretical work on para-diplomacy was built on Quebec, Flanders, Catalonia and the German Länder, federations with explicit sub-state external competences. India is a different species: a 'union' in which the residuary powers belong to the Centre and the states were never granted any formal external role (Singh, 2023). The concepts therefore travel to India only with modification: what Kincaid calls lobbying, India calls a political crisis; what Canada calls a competence, India calls an encroachment. The theoretical task of this paper is to show what Indian federalism does to these borrowed tools.

Two further bodies of work sharpen the analysis. The first is the emerging scholarship on the domestic politics of Indian foreign policy, which Nicolas Blarel has organised into four research streams: institutions and bureaucracies; public opinion and accountability; ideology and partisanship; and regional influences (Blarel, 2025). The fourth stream is the youngest and thinnest: despite a rich literature in foreign policy analysis on domestic determinants, 'there have been only limited attempts to develop robust domestic theories of foreign policy making in India' (Nicolas, 2017). This paper belongs squarely in that fourth stream. The second is the coalition-politics literature: because regional parties and national parties' bargain within a single federal arena, coalition configurations create 'locked-in alliances' that force national parties, under certain conditions, to accommodate the foreign policy preferences of regional parties (Blarel, 2019). Dependence of coalition governments on regional parties has produced 'a subtle power shift when it comes to foreign policy prioritisation and perceptions,' with states now 'bringing foreign and security issues to the bargaining table,' so that engaging state governments can become a 'force multiplier' for Indian foreign policy (Vinod et al., 2023).

Three caveats discipline this toolkit. First, subnational diplomacy is not uniformly threatening: most of it deals with the 'low politics' of trade and investment, and conflict with national policy runs more often in the other direction (Wyatt, 2018). Second, para-diplomacy may be an asset or a threat for the sovereign state, it can generate economic development, but may also lead to 'regional imbalance, ethnic mobilisation and separatism' (Chatterji & Saha, 2017). Third, the very concept of a subnational foreign policy must be handled sceptically: Rob Jenkins warns that classifying India as a case of 'constituent diplomacy' understates the central government's continued control over external borrowing and core infrastructure sectors such as electricity (Jenkins, 2003). The framework adopted here therefore treats federalisation as a spectrum, not a switch: the question is never whether the Centre has lost foreign policy, but how it manages the participation it can no longer prevent.

Constitutional Framework: The Centre's Exclusive Authority over External Affairs

The Constitution's centralism was not an oversight, it was a considered response to the trauma of Partition. The mood of the Constituent Assembly was recorded plainly: 'it would be injurious to the interests of the country to provide for weak central authority which would be incapable of ensuring peace, of coordinating vital matters of common concern and of speaking effectively for the whole country in the international sphere'. Partition had the practical consequence of transferring still more legislative authority from the states to the Union, including the residuary powers themselves. As one account puts it, the Constitution 'nowhere describes the polity as federal,' yet its distribution of powers and characteristics indicate that 'it predominantly works as a federation in times of peace and acts as a unitary government during an emergency' (Manish & Singh, 2022).

The Assembly's final design was deliberate in its asymmetry. B.R. Ambedkar described the 'dual polity' his committee had built, a Union at the Centre and States at the periphery, 'each endowed with sovereign powers to be exercised in the field assigned to them respectively by the constitution,' neither subordinate to the other within its sphere, while insisting that the country 'is one integrated whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source,' designed to work as a federal system in normal times and as a unitary system in times of war through the emergency provisions of Articles 250, 352 and 353. The residuary power was vested in the Centre by Article 248, an arrangement unusual among federations (Singh, 2023). India's federation, moreover, 'was carved out of a unitary administrative system evolved under British rule,' and the Constituent Assembly adopted, with localised modifications, major portions of the Government of India Act 1935. Institutional path dependency ran deeper than the Assembly itself.

The foreign affairs entries of the eventual Seventh Schedule, diplomatic and consular representation, the United Nations, entering into treaties, foreign jurisdiction, extradition, emigration, foreign loans, customs and export duties, form a comprehensive catalogue of external competence in Union hands alone, and the states' exclusion was total: no formal channel, no consultation right, 'even to make recommendations' (Singh, 2023). The legal scholarship confirms the depth of the design: the division of legislative power between Centre and States is worked out through Articles 246 and 254 and the Seventh Schedule, with external affairs and foreign policy the exclusive preserve of the Union (C. Dhananjaya, 2026). On paper, the cage was airtight.

Three features of this design deserve emphasis because they shape everything that follows. First, it was asymmetric in the extreme: unlike the German Basic Law or the Canadian constitution, the Indian text neither assigns external competences to the states nor creates intergovernmental machinery for foreign policy consultation (Schiavon, 2018). Second, it was fiscal as well as legal: states cannot borrow abroad except through the Union government, and cannot accept foreign grants and loans without central mediation, a leash that the Centre has held continuously (Singh & Manish, 2023, p. 4). Third, it was consciously unitary in spirit: the states' role in the Union was to be represented institutionally, through the Council of States and, in legislative practice, through the requirement that ordinary bills pass both houses, which meant central legislation could be stalled by a hostile Rajya Sabha (Singh, 2023). What the framers did not foresee was that each of these three features would become, within fifty years, a channel through which the states would re-enter the diplomatic game.

Historical Ruptures: How the States Entered Foreign Policy

Three dislocations, spread over six decades, turned the constitutional text into a fiction.

The end of one-party dominance. From 1947 to 1967, in what T.V. Sathyamurthy called 'the era of linguistic/cultural differentiation within a framework of unchallenged unity and integrity of the Indian state (1947-67),' the Congress ruled simultaneously at the Centre and in the states, and foreign policy was a Nehruvian monologue (Singh, 2023). The Prime Minister informed chief ministers of his decisions and briefed Parliament, but the states were not consulted as partners. Yet even this era was less monologic than the standard account allows: recent historiography emphasises that domestic elites, 'from within the ruling party and the opposition,' historically set limits on the exercise of executive power, and that the domestic debate shaped even alliance behaviour during the Nehru years (1947-1964) (Chaudhuri, 2012). The Sino-Indian border crisis of 1959-1962 is the classic proof: domestic politics deeply influenced the Nehru government's border policy and its negotiations with China (Rong-jiu, 2014). From the late 1970s, the Congress's electoral dominance cracked; Sathyamurthy noted that the centralised tendencies of the Centre in economic planning, finance and politics drove the states to abandon the socialist model and 'elect opposition parties to office' (Singh, 2023). Regional parties built on

regional interests captured state governments, and ‘conflicts then began to emerge between the centre and the states on policy issues’ (Singh, 2023). Coalition government at the Centre gave regional parties structural leverage: small parties are ‘frequently pivotal players in the government formation process,’ able to ‘extract sizeable concessions in return for their support’ (Singh, 2023). The political turbulence was visible in the arithmetic of the 1990s: between the end of the Cold War and 1999, India held five general elections and swore in as many as eight coalition governments (Sehgal et al., 2013). Foreign policy, formally exempt from all this, was steadily drawn into it.

The liberalisation shock of 1991. The New Economic Policy, adopted following the economic crisis, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and India's dependence on conditional loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, gave the states ‘unforeseen opportunities’ to engage in paradiplomatic activity (Singh, 2023). Adopting the free-market paradigm ‘considerably expanded the economic policymaking autonomy of subnational governments’ (Manish & Singh, 2022). Every state wanted a greater share of foreign investment, and economic competition among them became a defining feature of the decade, known in the literature as the ‘reform decade’ of 1991-2001 (Singh, 2023). Since 2000, the phenomenon of state governments sending high-level delegations abroad, conducting investment summits, and holding roadshows to reach foreign investors has been rising steadily. Economic necessity did what constitutional debate could not: it made the states agents on the international stage. The Centre's response was not resistance but accommodation: as regional parties multiplied at the Centre, the Union government ‘presumed a new role of being a regulator and facilitator’ of the states' external ties (Singh, 2023).

Competitive federalism as statecraft. By the 2000s the states were competing to present themselves, through policy reforms, ‘ease of doing business’ campaigns and infrastructure, as the best investment destinations, a competition that has produced both competitive and cooperative federalism (Singh, 2023). The Centre responded by institutionalising the trend: creating a States Division within the Ministry of External Affairs to assist the states with their foreign engagements, supporting state-level investment summits, and training state administrative machinery for external dealings (Singh, 2023; Singh & Manish, 2023). The 2014 government explicitly declared the principle of ‘cooperative federalism’ and created the MEA's States Division to involve states as ‘equal partners’ in foreign policy (Maitra & Chatterjee, 2021). Significantly, even after the return of single-party majority government in 2014, ‘the states are still pursuing to influence the foreign economic policy’ (Chatterjee & Maitra, 2023). This is federalisation with the blessing, or at least the tolerance, of the Centre.

One further consequence deserves notice. The federalisation of foreign policy has not been confined to the economic domain. The government's signature foreign policy instruments of the post-2014 period, the Act East Policy, the South Asian neighbourhood outreach, the projection of the Indian diaspora, are all, in practice, channelled through the states (Sukhdayak & Geetanjali, 2026). The Act East Policy, formally launched in November 2014, is implemented through the north-eastern states that share nearly all their borders with foreign countries (Doley, 2025). The Prime Minister's 2015 visit to Bangladesh, which produced the historic Land Boundary Agreement, was undertaken with chief ministers from the north-eastern states in tow (Tripathy & Baral, 2018). Diaspora diplomacy, as Section 5 shows, is increasingly state-based. The Centre has not been displaced; it has been forced to become an orchestrator of a chorus it once conducted alone.

Forms of State Engagement in Foreign Policy: A Typology

The empirical literature permits a typology. Indian state diplomacy appears in at least five distinct forms.

Economic diplomacy. The dominant form, and the earliest. The first dramatic instance was Maharashtra's direct deal with the American multinational Enron for the Dabhol Power Project, a state government ‘directly dealing with a foreign entity as per the devised regulations of the Union of India,’ which failed politically but taught every state government how far the new rules would stretch (Singh, 2023). The next phase was entrepreneurial. Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh was the first chief minister to venture out in the late 1990s to attract technology industries, creating the Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy City (‘HITEC City’) in 1995 as a joint public-private project, and persuading Microsoft to choose Hyderabad for its first research and development centre outside the United States (Agarwala, 2018). Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu together formed the ‘Silicon Triangle’ of the Indian software economy, evidence that regional government initiative, not merely central policy, was driving global integration (Eischen, 2005). Naidu's successors imitated

him: as Tridivesh Maini observes, 'while in the initial stages, the method utilised by most Chief Ministers was to reach out to investors by leading high-powered delegations to countries including China, Japan, and the US,' the practice 'began with the Vibrant Gujarat summit in 2003' (Singh, 2023).

Gujarat then normalised what Naidu had pioneered. Under Narendra Modi as chief minister, the state converted its diaspora links into commercial diplomacy, operating outside the Ministry of External Affairs through initiatives such as the Protocol of Cooperation between Gujarat and Russia's Astrakhan region, which built upon the Gujarati diaspora's two-century-long links with that region (Adamson & Han, 2024, p. 484). Modi promoted the Vibrant Gujarat summit in London in August 2003 at the Wembley Conference Centre, and later made official visits to China (2006 and 2011), Singapore (2006) and Japan (2012) as chief minister (Wyatt, 2018, p. 116). 'Vibrant Gujarat,' the scholar Ibrahim noted, 'has been successful in wooing domestic and foreign investments on a large scale' (Singh, 2023), and its biannual summits, held since 2003, became the template for 'Resurgent Rajasthan,' the 'Jharkhand Global Investors Summit,' 'Advantage Assam Global Investor Meet,' 'Happening Haryana Global Investors' Summit,' and 'Bengal Rides the Growth' (Singh, 2023).

Yet the economic face has a darker side: gains are concentrated. FDI inflows to India are concentrated in a few states, and econometric work shows that industrial output, social sector expenditure, judicial quality, connectivity, labour cost and credit availability differentiate high-FDI from low-FDI states, meaning the same states that win the investment competition also enjoy the institutional advantages that make them win again (Prabhakar & Aggarwal, 2023). The federal incoherence compounds this: sectoral exceptions and state-level regulatory disparities, flowing from the absence of a harmonised approach between central FDI policy and state regulation, further skew the distribution, with robust-institution states like Maharashtra and Karnataka attracting far more than their lagging counterparts (C. Dhananjaya, 2026).

Border and water diplomacy. Land-border states behave differently from maritime states: they press for trade routes, river-water sharing and trans-border movement, while coastal states focus on ports and the movement of goods (Manish & Singh, 2022). Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir and Rajasthan have asked the Centre to open trade routes and bus services with neighbouring countries; the opening of border haats, more motorable roads along the international border in the north-east, Punjab's persistent pressure for the Kartarpur corridor and for bus services with Pakistan are 'better examples of constituent diplomacy' (Singh, 2023). The north-eastern states are the strongest case: the region shares 98 per cent of its borders with Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, and the Act East Policy is unthinkable without it (Doley, 2025). Myanmar alone contributes a 1,643-kilometre border with four north-eastern states, and serves as India's gateway to ASEAN and a transit route to southern China (Kipgen, 2019). The region's strategic status has always been ambiguous, the North-Eastern Council and the joint jurisdiction of the Ministries of External Affairs and Home Affairs over it show how postcolonial India struggled to delineate the national from the international (Raghavan et al., 2022), and projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project seek to relieve the 'Chicken's Neck' bottleneck, though insurgency and uneven development continue to obstruct them (Gupta, 2025; Suresh, 2025).

Water is the most sensitive file. The Teesta river negotiation with Bangladesh has been hostage to West Bengal since its beginning: after the ad hoc arrangement of July 1983, which allocated Bangladesh 36 per cent and India 39 per cent of the flow, the two sides drafted an interim agreement in 2010 giving each 40 per cent with 20 per cent reserved as environmental flow (Aktar, 2021). But when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrived in Dhaka in September 2011 to sign the treaty, West Bengal's Chief Minister opposed it, insisting that water was a state subject and that the state's consent was required (Aktar, 2021). Mamata Banerjee demanded a 75:25 sharing ratio in India's favour and the deal collapsed (Baten & Titumir, 2015). The pattern repeated in April 2017, when renewed hope of signing was again refused in New Delhi (Aktar, 2021). Bengal's resistance stalled not only the treaty but the parallel negotiations on Indian transit facilities through Bangladesh (Parven & Hasan, 2018). Anand Kumar's balanced reading is worth recording: West Bengal's behaviour can be read as spoiling, but it can equally be read as the state protecting interests the Centre, 'far away from the region,' may not fully appreciate, a case for negotiating treaties 'after due diligence... taking into account all stakeholders' (Kumar, 2013). The Land Boundary Agreement of June 2015, which swapped 200 enclaves along the 6.1-kilometre border and decided the fate of more than fifty thousand people, succeeded precisely because the states were made parties to it (Tripathy & Baral, 2018).

Diaspora diplomacy. The states discovered early that the diaspora is not India's but theirs. Gujarat institutionalised this with the Non-Resident Gujarati Fund, and diaspora organisations, the Community Foundation Silicon Valley, the American India Foundation and the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, together contributed more than US \$14 million to the home state after the earthquake of 2002; this is 'one of the reasons why states proactively look after the NRGs by making policy guidelines by influencing the foreign policy' (Singh, 2023). Gujarat went furthest: it established a ministry to look into the demands of Non-Resident Gujaratis, assimilate them into policy formulation, and ask the Centre to address them, while inviting the diaspora to 'Global Gujarat' summits (Singh, 2023). District-level Non-Resident Gujarati committees were created across the state and the NRG identity card was revived to retain a database of overseas Gujaratis (Agarwala, 2018). Modi, as chief minister, 'has been brilliant at tapping the Gujarati Diaspora for support,' shifting the emphasis 'from eliciting investments to fomenting cultural ties and eliciting social contributions' (Agarwala, 2018). The comparison with Turkey is instructive: like the Turkish state, which created a formal Office for Turks Abroad in 2010, India has moved from treating the diaspora as a source of remittances to treating it as an instrument of external influence (Adamson & Han, 2024). The formalisation of the diaspora relationship through the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, inaugurated in 2003, gave states the platform to cultivate their own overseas constituencies (Tripathy & Baral, 2018; Verma, 2023).

The scale is considerable. By 2017 Prime Minister Modi had made 49 foreign trips explicitly to woo the Indian diaspora (Srinivas, 2019); the diaspora's annual income was estimated at US \$135.46 billion in the financial year 2024-25, with more than 35.42 million members worldwide by January 2024 (Dutta, 2025); and annual remittances, around \$80 billion, rank among the largest in the world (Verma, 2023). Individual states have begun to link this resource to their own diplomacy: Kerala's engagement with the Gulf is driven by the large number of its residents employed there (Singh, 2023), and when the UAE and Qatar offered US \$105 million in aid to Kerala after the floods, the state's claim to that aid rested on its 'long relationship' with the Gulf, exposing the unresolved ambiguity over whether states may accept foreign grants and loans at all (Singh, 2023). The Centre itself now mobilises the diaspora as a diplomatic instrument, particularly in Malaysia, where the Indian community accounts for nearly 8 per cent of the total population, and in Singapore, home to professional migrants; and it acknowledges that the states must be involved 'both in the context of seeking foreign direct investment, and especially in the context of the diaspora outreach' (Tripathy & Baral, 2018).

Political and humanitarian lobbying. Tamil Nadu's legislature has repeatedly demanded central intervention against the persecution of Tamils in Sri Lanka (Singh, 2023), and the 'Tamil Nadu factor', the state's government, parties and public opinion, has constrained New Delhi for four decades (Pattanaik, 2014). During the final phase of the Eelam war, the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils became an emotive issue in the state, and 'the politics of coalition has, in fact, made it difficult for New Delhi to pursue a policy independent of Tamil Nadu' (Pattanaik, 2014). At the United Nations Human Rights Council, India voted in favour of resolutions critical of Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2013, then abstained for the second time since 2014 in March 2021, tracking the electoral incentives of Tamil parties at home (Ranjan & Chattoraj, 2022). The UN position on Sri Lanka marks one of the clearest cases of domestic politics reaching into high politics: the Indian government could not openly support Colombo against the LTTE due to pressure from Tamil Nadu, even while it deployed the Navy and Coast Guard to patrol the seas to assist Sri Lanka (Singh, 2023). The 1987 intervention was itself 'seriously constrained by the domestic politics in India,' and its failure, India's policy drift dictated partly by Tamil Nadu's reservations, created the space for China to expand its foothold in the island (Kaura, 2024; Rajasingam, 2013). The reverse traffic is equally telling: in 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began her India tour in Kolkata, meeting Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, precisely because Banerjee had stalled FDI in multi-brand retail and an 'amicable' Teesta arrangement, the foreign policy of a foreign power now had to be routed through a state government (Singh, 2023). Clinton had done the same in Chennai in 2011, and presidents had preceded her: Bill Clinton visited Hyderabad, and Barack Obama visited Mumbai (Singh, 2023).

Urban and cultural diplomacy. The third tier of government has entered the act. Sister-city agreements, with Varanasi's partnership with Kyoto signed during the Prime Minister's 2014 visit to Japan, have brought cities into the external arena even where 'there are no statutory or constitutional provisions for para-diplomatic activity' (Singh, 2023). The comparative literature confirms this is a global trend: cities' increasing involvement in foreign policy is one of the newest developments in contemporary international relations, and India is catching up late

(Shah, 2026). Religious tourism has become a foreign policy instrument at the subnational level, connecting Uttar Pradesh with Nepal, and beginning direct flights between Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and Sri Lanka (Singh, 2023). The Kartarpur corridor, though negotiated between the two governments, was given life by subnational and religious constituencies: Punjab-to-Punjab cooperation across the border has a long pedigree, and during the India-Pakistan peace process of 2004-2007 'the leadership in both Punjabs tried to give peace a try by engaging in a number of joint initiatives' (Singh, 2023). The corridor itself, inaugurated on November 9, 2019, three days before the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, joined Dera Baba Nanak in India with Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan, and was framed by both governments as religious and cultural diplomacy (Bochkovskaya, 2021; Singh, 2023). The demand for it had been pressed from the Indian side since at least February 1999, when Prime Minister Vajpayee proposed it after his historic bus ride to Lahore (Chawla et al., 2020). This face of state diplomacy is the least institutionalised and the most expressive of India's pluralism, the subnational unit as cultural ambassador.

India in Comparative Perspective: Lessons from Other Federations

How unusual is India? The comparative literature suggests the Indian case is normal in form but distinctive in degree. In a systematic comparison of para-diplomacy across eleven federal systems, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Mexico, Russia, South Africa and the United States, Jorge Schiavon shows that sub-state international activity varies with constitutional provisions on foreign affairs and with the intergovernmental mechanisms available for foreign policy decision-making (Schiavon, 2018). On both variables India scores at the restrictive end; on the practice, it has moved toward the middle.

The contrast with Canada and Germany is sharp. Canada's provinces, exercising more policy-making latitude than the American states or the Mexican states, conduct a diplomacy that is constitutionally legitimate and institutionally dense (Zepeda, 2017). Germany's Länder engage actively in economic promotion, cultural exchange and environmental cooperation, and German cities are increasingly international actors in their own right (Ciesielska & Klikowska, 2026). In both cases, subnational diplomacy is channelled through constitutional allocations and intergovernmental councils; the federal government coordinates rather than tolerates. India has none of this machinery, its states act without constitutional sanction, yet the volume and variety of their activity now rivals systems that formally permit it (Wyatt, 2017).

The most instructive comparisons are the mixed ones. Belgium's regions can veto treaties, Wallonia famously blocked the CETA trade agreement with Canada, while the Quebec-California carbon market shows subnational governments leading in global governance areas such as climate policy (Paquin, 2026). These are cases where para-diplomacy is a formal power with formal consequences. China and Brazil offer the better parallels for India: in both, subnational governments have used international engagement as an instrument of economic development while the central state retains ultimate authority, and both offer lessons India has studied closely (Shah, 2026). The Sino-Indian comparison is particularly apt: Chatterji and Saha argue that the paradiplomatic experiences of India and China, and of both with the United States, reveal how 'globalisation and market reforms have made foreign policymaking a more inclusive and multilayered process' in emerging economies (Chatterji & Saha, 2017).

Three conclusions follow from the comparison. First, constitutional silence does not prevent subnational diplomacy; it merely changes its form, from negotiated competence to tolerated practice (Wyatt, 2018). Second, the risk profile differs: where subnational diplomacy is constitutionally sanctioned, it can block national policy; where it is tolerated, it can distort national policy but cannot veto it (Paquin, 2026). Third, India's trajectory, from denial to toleration to orchestration, resembles the Western evolution in compressed form, with the crucial difference that Indian federalisation has been driven by economic necessity and electoral arithmetic rather than by constitutional amendment (Manish & Singh, 2022).

Theoretical Implications of the Indian Experience

Three theoretical refinements emerge from the Indian experience.

First, federalism is an intervening variable, not a background condition. Thomas Risse-Kappen argues that 'differences in political institutions, policy networks, and societal structures account for different foreign policy outcomes when the impact of the international environment is controlled for public attitudes,' and that 'domestic structures are the intervening variable between public opinion and foreign policy' (Singh, 2023). India is the

confirming case: the same Tamil sentiment that was manageable in 1971 became a binding constraint once Tamil Nadu's party system changed, and the constitutional cage did not prevent this, it merely forced it to operate through informal channels rather than formal ones (Singh, 2023).

Second, Indian states play the two-level game at two removes. Foreign policy, as Kripa Sridharan notes, 'has the potential to be integrative' in that it 'consciously draws from all the three levels of causation, systemic, domestic and individual' (Singh, 2023). The Indian state government sits at the intersection of all three: it faces an electorate (domestic), a Union government (institutional), and foreign investors, governments and diasporas (systemic). The chief minister is Putnam's negotiator with a federal mediator standing between him and the international board, a three-level game for which the existing literature has no tidy model. This is why the coalition-politics literature is indispensable: the 'locked-in alliances' between national and regional parties make the second level of the game a coalition of state governments as well as of national parties (Blarel, 2019).

Third, what India is experiencing is orchestration, not retreat. The Centre has not lost control of foreign policy; it has outsourced its implementation. It supports state summits, trains state officials, and created the MEA's States Division to liaise with the states (Singh, 2023; Singh & Manish, 2023); it holds the fiscal leash through which all subnational borrowing and foreign grants must pass (Jenkins, 2003; Singh & Manish, 2023). The federalisation of Indian foreign policy is therefore 'complex, many layered and often deceptive': there is no straight causal lever that explains how the Centre, the states and the borders interact, and the Centre often 'deceives regional stakeholders or states with narratives of inclusiveness' (Chatterjee & Maitra, 2023; Maitra & Chatterjee, 2021). The trend coincides with, and is partly an instrument of, the reinvention of Indian foreign policy vocabulary after 2014, in which the idioms of nonalignment and strategic autonomy were pushed aside in favour of development-driven, diaspora-supported diplomacy (Hall, 2019). What the theory must absorb is that federalisation is a governance strategy, not a distribution of power.

Costs and Limitations of Federalised Foreign Policy

Federalisation is not free. Three costs deserve sober acknowledgement.

The first is the subordination of the national interest to regional electoral calendars. In the cases of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, states have at times pursued their peoples' interests over other issues, and India's bilateral decisions 'have remained debatable in strategic circles' (Singh, 2023). When the Teesta treaty is hostage to an election in Siliguri, Indian diplomacy loses predictability, the very quality, critics note, that Indian foreign policy has always lacked in its tendency to respond to the international milieu 'case-by-case without any requirement for a long-term strategic policy framework' (Pant, 2016). Domestic constraints have produced 'incremental, often reactive diplomacy,' pursued 'without an integrated doctrinal compass' (. &., 2026). The tension is real: the same regional pressure that protected West Bengal's farmers also damaged India's credibility as a treaty partner (Kumar, 2013).

The second is institutional ambiguity. Issues of state consultation with international bodies like the WTO, the ILO, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank 'are not clearly defined and agreed upon' (Singh, 2023). Because para-diplomacy has no statutory footing, its regulation is ad hoc; there is persistent ambiguity over whether states can borrow from and accept grants from foreign sources at all (Singh, 2023). Chief ministers' foreign visits go largely unrecorded, and serious scholarship repeatedly notes the absence of systematic data on subnational diplomacy in India (Singh, 2023; Nicolas, 2017).

The third is capacity and asymmetry. States eager to improve their 'ease of doing business' still 'lack administrative and political experience in dealing with foreign entities' (Singh & Manish, 2023), and the unequal size, resources and representation of states mean that federalisation benefits the already-strong, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu more than Bihar or Jharkhand (Jain & Maini, 2017; Prabhakar & Aggarwal, 2023). Only a handful of states are actively involved in foreign affairs at all, and even the energetic ones work on a small scale (Jain & Maini, 2017). Meanwhile, the para-diplomacy literature warns that unmanaged subnational engagement can deepen 'regional imbalance, ethnic mobilisation and separatism' (Chatterji & Saha, 2017). The Union-state relationship remains strained 'majorly due to their asymmetric representation in the Parliament and uneven distribution of functions and subjects' (Manish & Singh, 2022).

Conclusion: From De Facto Federalisation to De Jure Design

India has federalised its foreign policy from below. The Constitution's architects built a cage to prevent this; six decades of coalition politics, liberalisation and competitive federalism opened it. The question now is not whether the states will be part of Indian foreign policy, they already are, but whether the Centre will manage this consciously or endure it inadvertently. The mechanisms exist: the MEA's States Division, the trade summits, the training programmes (Singh, 2023; Singh & Manish, 2023). What is missing is constitutional candour, statutory recognition of what the states already do, and formal channels for what they will inevitably demand.

There is an argument for embracing this drift as a strength. A democracy of India's diversity cannot credibly project a foreign policy that looks outward while remaining deaf to the voices of its own borderlands, its maritime coasts, and its diasporas. As one scholar puts it, 'the constituent units of a federation should also have a role to play so that the country's foreign policy can reflect its domestic diversity' (Singh, 2023). Anand Kumar's defence of West Bengal's role makes the same point in miniature, states can 'add value to foreign policy making' and protect the Centre from jeopardising local interests (Kumar, 2013). The comparative evidence from every mature federation suggests that the states will not disappear from diplomacy, and that the choice is between coordination and chaos (Paquin, 2026; Schiavon, 2018).

The formidable strategic challenges that remain, the discipline of a long-term framework, the coherence of a single diplomatic voice, will not be solved by federalism. But a foreign policy that is federal in form and domestic in its antennae stands a better chance of being credible to the people whose lives it shapes. It was, after all, the states that forced the nation to remember that diplomacy is not only conducted in capitals; it is experienced at borders, rivers, shrines and factories. The provinces knocked on the door of diplomacy decades ago. The question before New Delhi is whether to keep answering case by case, or to open the door and design the room..

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