

CASE STUDY

How Indian foreign policy negotiates federalism: a case study of the role of the constituent states

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Abstract

India's centre-heavy federalism suffered dual downturns in the 1990s, with the tides of globalization and economic liberalization challenging the sanctity of borders and the incidence of coalition politics increasing the salience of regional equations and demands. But Indian foreign policy in the 1990s remained the almost exclusive preserve of the Centre, ruled by several coalitions of political parties like the National Front (1989–1996), United Front (1996–1998). As Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popular yet controversial regime is poised at the middle of its second term in 2022 (beginning in 2019), the continued showcasing of the Centre's leadership in foreign policy decisions, high-profile bilateral and multilateral engagements, bold collisions with uneasy neighbours, are only matched with the unilateralism exhibited within the borders. Given the oft-reported instances of acute voices of assertions by the states on various issues ranging from illegal and forced migration, resource-sharing, or economic development involving neighbouring countries, a stock-taking is needed, to explore how genuinely federal is India's foreign policy. In other words, the role of the constituent states in leveraging influence and bargaining for their due share of active involvement as stakeholders, merits critical academic intervention. When tested against real cases, two observations can be made. The dynamics shaping federalism and foreign policy may not just involve the Centre and the states but involve local/regional factors and influences from across international borders as well. Second, there is no causal link between the nature of the government in power at the Centre, Union-state political equations, and the imperatives across the borders between provinces and neighbouring countries. This study examines three case studies; West Bengal, Assam, and the Northeast, to reveal that foreign policy operates within the constitutionally designed structures of federalism in India by negotiating recurrent complexities of politics and deceives regional stakeholders or states with narratives of inclusiveness.

Keywords

Federalism, foreign policy, West Bengal, Assam, Northeast, domestic politics

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Author roles: Chatterjee S: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Maitra S: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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How to cite this article:

For printed version: Chatterjee Shibashis and Maitra Sreya. "How Indian foreign policy negotiates federalism: a case study of the role of the constituent states". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 58, (2022): 199–229. Printed 2023. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17417.2>.

For online version: Chatterjee S and Maitra S. **How Indian foreign policy negotiates federalism: a case study of the role of the constituent states.** *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2023, 2:13 <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17417.2>

Introduction

India is a democracy which governs the relationship between the Centre or Union (the seat of national government) and its constituent states (heretofore referred to as states or state) or regions through the principle of federalism. However, the Indian Parliament (the main law-making organ of the government) has retained exclusive powers to legislate on foreign affairs and security, all matters concerning the Indian union's foreign relations; diplomatic, consular and trade representation, national participation in international conference, war and peace; citizenship, foreign loans and trade and commerce with other countries and so on. There are also three more provisions which give the federal government full power with respect of foreign affairs. Firstly, the Indian parliament has power to make any law for the whole or any part of the territory of India for implementing any treaty, agreement or convention with any country, as specified by Article 253 of the Indian Constitution.¹ Secondly, the union has full executive powers for the implementation of its laws, treaties and agreements, as specified by Article 73 of the Indian Constitution. Thirdly, to prevent the states from obstructing the administration of laws by the Union, the executive powers of the states are to be so exercised as not to impede or prejudice the exercise of the executive power of the union, as specified by Article 257.²

The authors define India's history of experiences in functioning federalism by identifying three phases; the latter two of which have interspersed in certain ways. The first was the post-independence era of single party dominance (1947–1977), culminating in Centre-heavy federalism, oddly mandated by the nature of distribution of powers between the Centre and the states by the Indian constitution.³ The second was the post-liberalization phase, post-1990s, when regional aspirations combined with the fall of one-party hegemony (in other words, the hegemony of the Congress Party at the Centre) and witnessed the rise of coalition politics. This was also the beginning of overt tussles between the unstable coalition governments at the Centre and relatively robust ruling parties in the states like the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh among others pulling at the core of the hitherto rigid dynamics of federal functioning in India. The changes made way for the third and the more recent stage (2014 onwards), when in the spirit of cooperative federalism, Prime Minister Modi announced greater role-sharing between the Centre and the constituent states. However, in real terms, Centre-state relations depend primarily on political and party equations. The fact that the National Democratic Alliance has been ruling with a large majority since 2014 to the present day in 2022 (the next national assembly elections in India are due in 2024), and the leading party

¹ "Constitution of India," <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/coi-4March2016.pdf>.

² "Constitution of India."

³ S.K. Mitra, *Politics in India* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

of the alliance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) enjoys a comfortable majority on its own, frees the centre in its dealings vis-à-vis the states to a great extent, which, incidentally, also includes issues having major bearings for India's foreign relations. It is in between these second and third phases, that is, the post-liberalization era of coalition governments gaining ground and the current spirit of cooperative federalism amidst a strong, single party like the Bharatiya Janata Party leading the alliance at the Centre, that this paper shall explore. This paper shall focus not on the history of India's federal narrative as such, but how the changes in the nature of federalism since the 1990s onwards, have pushed concomitant revisions in India's foreign policy calculations.

The central argument of this study is that India's foreign policy in the present era is largely, but not exclusively, conditioned by domestic politics especially neighbouring states (like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, which are geographical neighbours of India). The in-built federal bias toward the Centre, curated in a planned manner over the years, is being persistently challenged by strong and viable local political parties with astute regional understanding and power aspirations, especially in border states (like West Bengal, Assam and the North-eastern states). At one level, India has been compelled to gravitate towards a more inclusive foreign policy, recognizing the significance of the contiguous states (like Bangladesh), particularly border states as stakeholders. India has had to abandon its unilaterally constructed, Centre-driven architecture of foreign relations. But at another level, the results of such Centre-state bandwagoning or balancing (forming alliances or maintaining bargaining power through other means) have not always yielded desirable results in foreign relations. As the paper discusses, in certain cases, the fallout has been complications in ties, awkwardness and abeyance of relations, over and above unresolved problems of national significance. This paper will explore how at the present time, states can act as catalysts or road-blocks in foreign policy, but they surely matter in the ultimate calculations of power with the Centre. Conversely, states also have to bear the brunt of ill-planned or autocratic decisions adopted by the Centre and present strong impetus for reversals of such policies, notwithstanding the costs to be borne in foreign relations particularly with regard to India's fraught neighbourhood, specifically countries like Bangladesh. While the jury is still out on the nature of the federal balance in foreign policy (in the sense that, it is hard to conclude whether the Centre retains more power of the constituent states), the main piece of the puzzle remains the ability of the states to successfully bargain at the most, or interfere at the least, (with the Centre and its policies) amidst a domestic political landscape where the roots of coalition hold, but the entrenched national party at the Centre (which is at

present the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rings ominous bells for cooperative federalism and cautions the states from taking anything for granted.⁴

Research questions

In this section, we introduce specific research questions and justify our methodological choice. Our first question is what are the perceptible shifts in Indian foreign policy to negotiate the recent trend of regions trying to bargain in foreign policy through federal powers, as opposed to the previous trend where the Centre dictated terms for the regions? A related question raised in the paper is whether cooperative federalism has actually been implemented in the era of Narendra Modi (since 2014 to the present times). Secondly, what potential interruptions in smooth foreign relations do Centre-state tensions hold, especially when Border States are involved? The India-Bangladesh relations serve as case in point; the role of India's northeast, Assam and West Bengal have had tremendous implications on the template of relations with India's eastern neighbour. This is one of the reasons why this study has chosen these three states/regions; to illustrate how Indian foreign policy negotiates federal trends in modern times. To that end, this study uses the following research methodological tools-historical narrative of Indian federalism and the case study method. Case studies are the best suited method for answering our research questions, as a case study provides context-sensitive, detailed information about a concrete empirical problem and helps us to identify the attributes, ideas, and consequences of the case. The use of the case studies helps to establish the broad trends and patterns, since India's diversity and volatility of regional politics make it difficult to theorize in general terms. In the context of this paper, a flexible range of cases is difficult to fixate on for dual reasons. First, as the paper

⁴ See A. Asthana and H. Jacob, "Federalism and foreign affairs in India," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Foreign Relations Law*, ed. C.A. Bradley (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2019), 315–332, [https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ALOYDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Asthana,+Anamika,+and+Happy+moon+Jacob.+%22Federalism+and+foreign+affairs+in+India.%22+In+The+Oxford+Handbook+of+Comparative+Foreign+Relations+Law,+ed.+Curtis+A.+Bradley+\(Oxford+Handbooks+Online\),+2019:+315-332.+&ots=h1wQy0KdJm&sig=iaer0qM63hixtbASum60X-CznFY#v=onepage&q=Federalism%20and%20foreign%20affairs%20in%20India&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ALOYDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Asthana,+Anamika,+and+Happy+moon+Jacob.+%22Federalism+and+foreign+affairs+in+India.%22+In+The+Oxford+Handbook+of+Comparative+Foreign+Relations+Law,+ed.+Curtis+A.+Bradley+(Oxford+Handbooks+Online),+2019:+315-332.+&ots=h1wQy0KdJm&sig=iaer0qM63hixtbASum60X-CznFY#v=onepage&q=Federalism%20and%20foreign%20affairs%20in%20India&f=false); S. Ganguly ed., *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), https://www.ufmg.br/dri/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/indianforeignpolicy_ganguly.pdf; S. Maitra and S. Chatterjee, "Federalization of Indian Foreign Policy: Recent Trends," in *The Interface of Domestic and International Factors in India's Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2021), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003122302-17/federalization-indian-foreign-policy-sreya-maitra-shibashis-chatterjee>; H.V. Pant and A. Paliwal, "Foreign Policy Analysis and Indian Foreign Policy," in *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy: Theory and Praxis*, ed. H.V. Pant (U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 106–124; C.K. Sharma and W. Swenden, *Understanding Contemporary Indian Federalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-Contemporary-Indian-Federalism-Competing-Perspectives-New/Sharma-Swenden/p/book/9780367892739>; L. Tillin, *Indian Federalism (Oxford India Shorts Introduction)* (India: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/indian-federalism-oxford-india-short-introductions-9780199495610?cc=us&lang=en&>; A. Varshney, "How Has Indian Federalism Done?," Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Sage, *Studies in Indian Politics* 1, no. 1 (2013): 43–63.

seeks to establish, the trend toward centralization has been a pan-India phenomenon for a complex inter-play of political reasons, Secondly, the growing tendency of regional states to counter forces of centralization has also been established through specific instances and developments contingent on particular issues of foreign policy, where the states' were involved as genuine stakeholders and they expected state interest to be accommodated within national interest a la foreign policy. These too, the paper shall cite while elaborating on the context of reworked federalism in India since the 1990s. Some of the cases which may fall outside the scope of the paper but demand due mention would be; India's recent tussle with Nepal over the redrawing of the map, but the necessity to handle it sensitively owing to the ethnic community being spread on both sides of the border.⁵ Another case in point would be India's relations with Sri Lanka and the constant disputes regarding the straying of fishermen in terms of maritime boundaries, the unsettled Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India and so on. There are other incidents which have locked foreign and domestic politics together, such as the impasse between the government of Kerala and Italian Defense Department in 2012, over the trial of two Italian marines in Rome who had killed fishermen in Kerala.⁶ Focusing on how the post-colonial vivisections have lumped shared communities around India's borders without much clear demarcation, the paper shall focus on the citizenship debate involving Assam and India's Northeast. It shall illustrate through this case how a seemingly domestic issue of citizenship status has assumed much larger implications and has embroiled the entire Indian nation and its neighbouring states by invoking the questions of identity and origin, thereby involving key foreign policy concerns. The uneasy overlap between the domestic and the international or foreign in terms of policy-making, shall also be explored in the course of the discussion. The specific ramifications on Assam as a regional state bears significance for the scope of the paper. We also take the northeast as a separate case study, to highlight the economic and connectivity issues which bear salience in foreign policy calculations with India's neighbours in the East. These three case studies, namely West Bengal, Assam and the Northeast also serve to highlight the bargaining capacities of the states in the dual registers of identity and economic connectivity; that is, to assert their indigenous, community identity as well as strategic significance.

A note on theory

The theoretical premise of this study is the link between domestic politics and foreign policy. While admitting the abiding wisdom of political realism (as a theoretical orientation) in prioritizing the claims of national interest as the primary driver of foreign policy decision making, this study aims to show that the definition

⁵ C. Thakkar, "States in Action: Federalism and Foreign Policy in India," *South Asian Voices, Stimson Research Centre*, September 1, 2021, <https://southasianvoices.org/states-in-action-federalism-and-foreign-policy-in-india/>.

⁶ Thakkar, "States in Action."

of what counts as ‘state interest’ is shot through the intricacies of democratic bargaining in a complex and noisy federal polity like India; in other words, it lacks universality. This is far more complex than the two-level game model of Robert Putnam. Robert Putnam’s two-level game simply explained that international negotiations involve interested parties exerting often contradictory pressures on the political process at multiple levels. Hence, Putnam draws attention to the close braiding of international and domestic stakeholders. In his words, “Across the international table sit his foreign counterparts, and at his elbows sit diplomats and other international advisors. Around the domestic table behind him sit party and parliamentary figures, spokespersons for domestic agencies, representatives of key interest groups, and the leader’s own political advisors”.⁷ The leaders must satisfy both sets of groups to achieve meaningful breakthroughs in the negotiation process because “at the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments”.⁸ We are complicating this two-level model without disputing its core assumptions. The domestic level, in multicultural societies and federal states, is itself witness to a two-level game, where the chief ministers or the formal elite must consult and find ways of satisfying the demands of the local-level politicians and other actors, without whose support a unified policy cannot be framed in the first place. Domestic politics is certainly sufficiently complicated, as provincial-level politicians are often caught up in intense bargaining with their federal counterparts on contentious issues in the bordering provinces.⁹ As a sub-continent, its history, sociology, regional geopolitics, and economic needs often make it impossible for government to define a foreign policy that is of complete national interest for all citizens. Thus, a normative puzzle presents itself where despite empirical evidences and cases, an elegant theory sufficiently holding the reins of possible narratives on the linkages between foreign policy and domestic politics within a federal structure seems wanting. The aim of this paper is to underline the potential scope and urgency for this undertaking and take a step toward the need to construct a fool-proof theory on federalism, foreign policy and domestic politics.¹⁰

⁷ R.D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” (MIT Press, University of Wisconsin Press, Cambridge University Press, International Organization Foundation), *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–60.

⁸ Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 427–60.

⁹ A.K. Ghosh, “The Paradox of ‘Centralised Federalism’: An Analysis of the Challenges to India’s Federal Design,” ORF Occasional Paper 272, 2020, 15–17, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-paradox-of-centralised-federalism/>.

¹⁰ See R. Chatterji, “Foreign Policy and federalism,” Commentaries, Observer Research Foundation, 2014, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/foreign-policy-federalism/>; Maitra and Chatterjee, “Federalization of Indian Foreign Policy.”

The provincial elites (the decision-makers situated in the states) are not necessarily constitutionally mandated in this role. Yet, the political equation that prevails between the bordering states and the central government, and the electoral strength that the federal authorities enjoys, largely determines the implementation of foreign policy decisions. National governments usually follow policies that are considered appropriate to meet national security and developmental needs. However, such decisions are workable only when the provincial political elites are a part of the 'deal'; being sufficiently consulted and engaged in the process. Unless the needs of domestic politics are congruent with foreign policy goals, there is little evidence of any progress or success achieved in regards to India's external policies with Bangladesh, which is the chosen case for this study.

In the first section of the paper, the changing federal tendencies in post-colonial India and its implications for federalism are examined, with special attention to the last two decades. The second section focuses on all Indian states as stakeholders within the federal foreign policy and the cases of West Bengal, Assam and the Northeast region are studied. In the final section, concluding observations are offered.

Reworked federalism and implications on foreign policy

The emergence of modern South Asian states through the complex processes of colonialism created territorial (political) and anthropological (social) mismatches that must have posed difficulties for social communication and created challenges for India's foreign policy in the immediate neighbourhood.¹¹ However, the painful birth through a violent partition (1947) and bloodshed, huge dislocation of the population, coupled with the prospect of internal fragmentation and implosion (insurgencies leading to secessionism), led to the crafting of a federal polity with a clear unitary bias.¹² Hence, the need for consolidation and unity trumped the arguments borne out of variety and fluidity. Foreign policy became the template where the nation could speak as one, despite bordering states having their own experiences in dealing with the neighbours. The political dominance of the Congress party in the initial decades (late 1940s to 1960s) reinforced the constitutional framework of unitary federalism. But this unitary character of the federal order was also decidedly accommodative in its social and political commitments; that is, it sought to create an inclusive polity where minorities and under-represented groups acquired a legitimate political voice.¹³ As a consequence, India's foreign policy also gained

¹¹ B.S. Kohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691000435/colonialism-and-its-forms-of-knowledge>.

¹² E. Sridharan, "Indo-Sri Lanka Relations: Geopolitics, Domestic Politics, or Something More Complex?," in *Engaging the World: Indian Foreign Policy since 1947*, ed. S. Ganguly (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Ghosh, "Paradox of 'Centralised Federalism'," 15–17.

sensitivity to deviations and embraced accommodative and inclusive practices in its neighbourhood.¹⁴

With the gradual weakening of the Congress system (through losing their electoral base) and strong regional political parties (DMK, National Conference) coming into prominence in the 1990s, the political dynamic underlying the Centre-heavy federal architecture suffered a major setback.¹⁵ Three concurrent developments took place. First, the regions came of age and became politically vocal; this meant that the one-party dominant system gave way to the multi-party system of coalition politics (such as National Front from 1989 to 1990; United Front from 1996 to 1998); and thirdly, the forces of globalization exercised significant impact over provinces and regions, increasing their strategic significance as markets and heightening connectivity. A change in the federal character from the 1990s onwards was, therefore, underway. While this had major domestic repercussions, the foreign policy consequences were also far from being trivial in nature.¹⁶

India's federalism was tailored for the peaceful coexistence of multiple diversities of language and ethnicity.¹⁷ But the constitutional arrangements soon proved inadequate to meet with spiralling ethnic assertions (Punjab, Assam, Andhra Pradesh among others) the **States Reorganisation Act 1956** was the first major reform of the boundaries of India's states to organize them along language; a region where the residing population spoke the same language would form a regional state.¹⁸ It also proved to be a modification of the federal framework to accommodate linguistic demands. However, tensions related to identity questions simmered in different parts of the country like the northeast, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁹ Various solutions were devised. Autonomy and secessionist demands in Assam by ethnic communities were attempted to be resolved through the creation of autonomous councils.²⁰ Large and multi-ethnic states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar were split into new provinces in 2000 to bring about better governance

¹⁴ Sridharan, "Indo-Sri Lanka Relations."

¹⁵ C. Candland, "Congress Decline and Party Pluralism in India," *Journal of International Affairs South Asia: The Challenges of Statehood* 51, no. 1 (1997): 19–35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24357463>; D. Satyanarayana, "Coalition Politics in India," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 158, no. 1/4 (1997): 68–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41855750>.

¹⁶ Ghosh, "Paradox of 'Centralised Federalism'," 15–17.

¹⁷ Ghosh, 15–17.

¹⁸ E. Annamalai, "Politics of Language in India," in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal* (Routledge: New York, 2010), 213–231.

¹⁹ G. Singh, "Crises of National Unity in India: Punjab, Kashmir and the Northeast," in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, ed. P.R. Brass (New York: Routledge, 2010), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203878187-28/crises-national-unity-india-punjab-kashmir-northeast-gurharpal-singh>.

²⁰ J.K. Sarmah, "An Alternative Formulation for Autonomous Councils in Assam," *Econ Polit Weekly* 46, no. 35 (2011): 23–25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23017900>.

and deliver social justice, while at the same time deflecting the need to usher any serious alteration of the standard federal model.²¹ In other words, the federal model in India is still based on the principle of linguistic organization of provinces. However, this principle will not in the way of making smaller states if better governance through decentralization demands it. While these problem-solving techniques were met with success, similar attempts in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal faced tough resistance. While Telangana was ultimately carved out of Andhra Pradesh, following protracted political and legal-constitutional battles in June 2014, the West Bengal government led by Trinamool Congress continues to oppose the legitimacy of the Gorkhaland movement, despite the Centre's fleeting sympathy with the cause.²²

This discussion lends itself to the core theme of the study, that is, the growing salience of the states as independent variable in the linkages between federal structure of India and its and foreign policy. First, the exercise of accommodating multiple ethnic assertions and recognizing collective identities, has altered the federal structure of India significantly since independence in 1947. Local people and their concerns has gained more political traction, despite not having equal financial power with the Centre. This has hastened vertical and horizontal political interactions and linkages and at the same time, encouraged relatively smaller ethnic groups and communities to come together and articulate their political grievances comprehensively and argumentatively viz-a-viz the Centre. As a result, the democratic space within the federal structure has been put to the test. Concurrently, states have been inspired to boldly bargain with the Centre on all issues since the 1990s. The border States, owing to their strategic and geopolitical significance in navigating foreign relations with neighbours, have received particular prominence, in terms of their inclusivity in major diplomatic acts; that is their participation in diplomatic visits and foreign policy exchanges. The rulers in the states have realized that issues at stake in foreign policy involving the Centre, also carries consequences for the governance of the province.²³ The other strategically located states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir have demanded to be heard if not vote on all policies, domestic or external, that affect their resources and overall governance. As the Centre requires more cooperation, it has to placate these states rather than face their resistance.²⁴

²¹ "Telangana: new Indian state closer to reality after government approval," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/telangana-state-indian-government-approval>.

²² P. Muktan, "Darjeeling violence: Challenges ahead for Mamata as demand for Gorkhaland remains relevant even after a century of protests," June 28, 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/darjeeling-unrest-why-demand-for-gorkhaland-remains-relevant-even-after-a-century-of-protests-3750319.html>.

²³ Ghosh, "Paradox of 'Centralised Federalism'," 15–17.

²⁴ S. Ruparelia, *Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India* (New York and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Globalization and liberal reforms have also altered the federal dynamics significantly.²⁵ Financially powerful states have largely introduced economic reforms (like relaxed rules of business) since 2000; Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal have attracted foreign investments.²⁶ But poorer and weaker states (like states in the northeast) have suffered owing to the stringent demands of financial institutions and agencies of global capital and decreasing federal support from the Centre. States which have gained in the process by attracting more business (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh), have become politically more assertive and tried to exercise influence over foreign economic policy decisions. In contrast, the economically disadvantaged states (Bihar, Jharkhand Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Meghalaya)²⁷ have tried to disrupt decision-making to attract attention to their disempowered conditions.²⁸ For the Centre, these weaker provinces have presented a puzzle; it can neither buy off dissent nor compensate in any meaningful or beneficial way. Thus, the trend affecting Indian federal balance is that while on the one hand, financial weakness does not translate into political fragility, on the other hand, economically underperforming states do become uncooperative; prioritising their immediate and local interests above the national ones.²⁹

At another level, the political landscape in India has changed since the post-liberalisation era of coalition politics, that is, post-1990, coaxing federalism to operate on a different field. First, with the decline of the hegemony of the Congress rule, new political forces, led by the regional parties and the Hindu right-wing outfits (like the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh, Shiv Sena) have usurped the political space.³⁰ These regional parties have highlighted provincial issues and mostly offered local narratives and regional representation. The normative basis of policymaking observed in the Congress era (1947–1970s) have also been dented, particularly, the

²⁵ Sharma and Swenden, *Understanding Contemporary Indian*.

²⁶ “Major Destinations of Investment in India,” *India Briefing*, 2021, <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/top-investment-destinations-in-india-doing-business-state-governance-development-level-23034.html/>.

²⁷ “Bihar, Jharkhand, UP emerge as poorest states in India: NITI Aayog,” *Business Standard*, November 27, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/bihar-jharkhand-up-emerge-as-poorest-states-in-india-niti-aayog-121112600679_1.html.

²⁸ “Punjab polls: Chhattisgarh CM Baghel slams Centre over inflation,” *Hindustan Times*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/punjab-assembly-election/punjab-polls-chhattisgarh-cm-baghel-slams-centre-over-inflation-101643662720329.html>; S. Nezami, “Centre should fulfil all pending demands: Oppn,” *Times of India*, February 1, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/centre-should-fulfil-all-pending-demands-oppn/articleshow/89258700.cms>.

²⁹ Sharma and Swenden, *Understanding Contemporary Indian*.

³⁰ P. Chhibber, “Who Voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party?,” *Brit J Polit Sci* 27, no. 4 (1997): 631–639, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/194232>; R. Datta, “Hindu Nationalism or Pragmatic Party Politics? A Study of India’s Hindu Party,” *Int J Polit, Culture, and Society* 12, no. 4 (1999): 573–588, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20019991>; S. Seshia, “Divide and Rule in Indian Party Politics: The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party,” *Asian Surv* 38, no. 11 (1998): 1036–1050.

commitments to secularism, state planning, and a non-aligned foreign policy.³¹ States have sought to appropriate these core values in their own ways.³² Secondly, the Hindu right has steadily grown in Indian politics and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), heir to the erstwhile political party Jan Sangh, has steadfastly backed an alternative narrative based on the Hindutva philosophy, that emphasizes religious nationalism and the making of an aggressive nationalistic state that emphasizes shared traits like cultural vitality, virility and notions of purity and fullness.³³ The BJP fashioned a coalition, the NDA, that brought together both right-wing regional parties and anti-Congress formations across the country in 1998. Since the BJP majority government in 2014, led by Narendra Modi, a new political environment has been created that has had affected all states, particularly those that are ruled by the non-BJP parties.³⁴ However, this has not fundamentally altered the federalizing trends in Indian foreign policy. In fact, in the cases of Assam and Tripura, the BJP has apparently shifted the regional response to Bangladesh by securitizing the migration discourses.³⁵

Indian politics has witnessed a steady rise in identity assertions by underprivileged and oppressed groups, across sections such a women, the *dalit* community, ethnic minorities.³⁶ While India's politics of positive discrimination were originally meant for backward castes (Scheduled Castes) and tribes (Scheduled Tribes), newer groups have continually targeted the state for economic benefits. India's identity politics remain manifestly state-driven, and the state is the site of endless agitations by groups that bargain persistently to increase their share of state benefits and often mobilize against each other in this complex struggle for spoils.³⁷ In simplest of terms, Indian politics at all levels attracts groups towards the state since no other institution can provide assured gains so quickly. The state, in short, is thus the reference point for the group. While the vocalization of the rights of marginalized groups has no direct bearing on the foreign policies strategies of the

³¹ C. Jaffrelot, "The Fate of Political Secularism in India," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/fate-of-secularism-in-india-pub-78689>.

³² Jaffrelot, "Fate of Political Secularism."

³³ T.B. Hansen, *Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691006710/the-saffron-wave>.

³⁴ C. Jaffrelot, "Gujarat Elections: The Sub-Text of Modi's 'Hattrick'—High Tech Populism and the 'Neo-middle Class,'" *Stud Indian Politics* 1, no. 1 (2013): 79–95; T. Thachil, "Elite Parties and Poor Voters: Theory and Evidence from India," *Am Polit Sci Rev* 108, no. 2 (2014): 454–477.

³⁵ S. Baruah, "Protective Discrimination and Crisis of Citizenship in North-East India," *Econ Polit Wkly* 38, no. 17 (2003): 1624–1626, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4413479>; L. Tillin, "United in Diversity? Asymmetry in Indian Federalism," *Publius* 37, no. 1 (2007): 45–67.

³⁶ S. Dam, "The Myth of Identity Politics in India: Identity Constructs over Political Realities?," *Indian J Polit Sci* 62, no. 4 (2011): 913–926, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856527>.

³⁷ B. Narayan, "Democracy and Identity Politics in India: Is It a Snake or a Rope?," *Econ Polit Wkly* 50, no. 16 (2015): 61–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24482067>.

Indian state, nonetheless, it invariably encourages accommodative tendencies within the federal setup and emphasises the importance of local politicians in any deal-making with neighbouring states. As India invests more into infrastructural projects across borders, particularly in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, the influence of the provincial and local politicians is bound to rise, as these provide opportunities for profit and political influence.³⁸

Intermittent violence is also a feature of India's political landscape, be it in Kashmir or in some of India's north-eastern states.³⁹ While the intensity of the insurgencies has declined steadily over the years, the peace is often obtained at a considerably high cost. Order is imposed by limiting normal democratic functioning, militarizing and securitizing politics, suspending normal modes of communication (physical and virtual), and through the imposition of draconian laws that severely curtail rights.⁴⁰ The ongoing disturbances and the retaliation by the state direct at the limits of India's nation-building exercise and unmistakably intertwine the domestic and the international, no matter how much the Indian state attempts to insulate the outside influences from provoking trouble in within sovereign spaces.⁴¹

Regional states as stakeholders in Indian foreign policy

The role of states in the making of foreign policy in a federal polity, either by way of facilitation or obstruction, is a function of many factors. These include the nature of the government in power at the Centre, Union-state political equations, and the imperatives across the borders between provinces and neighbouring countries. However, since the Modi regime established itself after the electoral victory of 2014, despite a comfortable majority, the government decided to involve states in the making of foreign policy.⁴² It was institutionalized this trend further by creating a State's Division in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This is headed by a senior officer with the rank of joint secretary and is meant to "to coordinate facilitation of efforts . . . between . . . Mission/Post(s) and State/Union Territories Governments as well as foreign diplomatic and trade missions in India."⁴³ This

³⁸ "Regional Connectivity: An Opportunity for India," *The Financial Express*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/regional-connectivity-an-opportunity-for-india/2369864/>.

³⁹ A. Lamb, *The Kashmir Problem* (New York: Praeger, 1966); J.B. Dasgupta, "Jammu and Kashmir," Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1968; G. Singh, "Crises of National Unity in India: Punjab, Kashmir and the Northeast," in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, ed. P.R. Brass (New York: Routledge, 2010), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203878187-28/crises-national-unity-india-punjab-kashmir-northeast-gurharpal-singh>.

⁴⁰ Asthana and Jacob, "Federalism and foreign affairs," 315–332.

⁴¹ S.K. Das, *Ethnicity, Nation, and Security, Essays on Northeastern India* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2003), <https://indiaclub.com/products/11816-ethnicity-nation-and-security-essays-on-northeastern-india>.

⁴² H. Jacob, "Putting the Periphery at the Centre: India's States Role in Foreign Policy," *Carnegie India*, 2016, <https://carnegieindia.org/2016/10/10/putting-periphery-at-center-indian-states-role-in-foreign-policy-pub-64724>.

⁴³ Jacob, "Putting the Periphery at the Centre."

new division was unprecedented and indicative of the newfound recognition in New Delhi of the significant role that states have come to play in the country's foreign policy engagements. Modi invoked the importance of instilling a spirit of "cooperative federalism" in the relationship between the central government and various state governments and treating the Chief Ministers as equal partners. In November 2015, Modi stated: "In a break with over sixty-five years of tradition, we have involved states even in foreign policy. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has been asked to work with the States."⁴⁴ To foster external linkages, the MEA has mandated its foreign service officers to specialize in at least two Indian states. The 'Meet the States' initiative chooses to focus on increasing the exposure of foreign envoys to India's regional strengths. This division is also meant to provide a single operational window for routine administrative affairs such as travel arrangements of regional leaders or formalization of sister city arrangements.⁴⁵ However, for the purposes of academic analysis, it must be noted that the literature on federalism and foreign policy has not assumed concrete shape in the Indian context, except for preliminary observations regarding the current state of affairs and observable trends. Even the literature on Modi's reign does not throw much light on any critical analysis of interlinking of domestic and foreign policy options.⁴⁶ There are remarks that the states are increasing their stakes and pitch to demand inclusion in the bargaining process, but most discussions tend to focus on the competition for economic resources, such as invitation of foreign companies for FDI.⁴⁷ An interesting section of the current literature does focus on how Modi's quest for prominence through foreign policy overtures is directly linked with a re-invented foreign policy of India, underlined by robust Hindutva ideology and conscious rupturing with the past legacy of the Nehru era.⁴⁸ For the purpose of this paper, the key take-away from this incisive thesis is that Modi's deliberate, intentional purpose behind revamping India's foreign policy is actually predicated on purchases in domestic politics; in other words, it rests on the belief that public perceptions of success in foreign policy would consolidate Modi's position as a national leader and

⁴⁴ Jacob.

⁴⁵ Thakkar, "States in Action."

⁴⁶ H. Pant and K. Taneja, "Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Foreign Policy in Transition under Modi," Observer Research Foundation, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/looking-back-looking-ahead-foreign-policy-in-transition-under-modi-53332/>; N. Sahoo, "Decoding Modi's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/23/decoding-modi-s-foreign-policy-pub-56711>; S. Saran, "In Year Four, Modi's Foreign Policy Needs some Course Correction," *The Wire*, May 29, 2017, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/modi-foreign-policy-course-correction>.

⁴⁷ "The Modi Doctrine," *Outlook*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/the-modi-doctrine/291047>.

⁴⁸ I. Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (Great Britain: Bristol University Press, 2019), <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/modi-and-the-reinvention-of-indian-foreign-policy>; A.G. Noorani, "Hindutva Stamp in Modi's Foreign Policy," *Frontline*, July 11, 2021, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/books/hindutva-stamp-in-modis-foreign-policy/article35251304.ece>.

produce sufficient electorate mandate.⁴⁹ However, this paper chooses to examine the ‘domestic’ in foreign policy even more closely and objectively. And such an exploration reveals that the institutionalization of cooperative federalism may very well be a strategy of co-option of the critical voices, rather than an attempt to adjust foreign policy to what neighbouring states may either prefer or feel strongly about. The attempt is often to align foreign policy choices so that state leadership does not obstruct foreign policy decisions. From a systemic perspective, this seems perfectly meaningful. But this also reveals the fact that federalisation of foreign policy is a political process which is affected in nature and character by domestic political tendencies. Hence, on balance, one finds that the government has a mixed record of success in aligning foreign policy choices. In some cases, they have succeeded, in some others they have not. It could be argued that as India has veered towards a one-party dominated system once again after a long hiatus, the voice of states like Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in foreign policy matters count for less, if their perspectives differ from the general consensus.⁵⁰ Hence, in Punjab and Tamil Nadu aligning of foreign policy with domestic politics has succeeded much more than in West Bengal, where the ruling party at the Centre (BJP) witnessed a very difficult relationship for much of the last five years. This analysis presents a possible answer to our question on whether the Modi regime has been able to genuinely deliver on the promise of cooperative federalism.

A further point here is the tendency among scholars to standardize articulated perspectives at the state level. While, normal foreign policy analysis would indeed stress the official discourses, and there are genuine difficulties in mapping sub-altern viewpoints on foreign policy matters, it must be underscored that the opinion is always mixed in nature, reflecting the complex democratic processes at the level of states.⁵¹ For example, the take of politicians based in West Bengal on India’s relation with Bangladesh may not be what their counterparts hold in the border districts. Such differences emanate from political calculations of parties rather than any objective assessment of material gains and losses. Hence, statements issued by state leaders does not reflect ground realities fully.⁵² If local politicians do not agree to Centre-state deals on foreign policy, while they may not succeed in altering the output, they can resist on the ground and put-up roadblocks to an

⁴⁹ Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention*; Noorani, “Hindutva Stamp.”

⁵⁰ V. Ramakrishnan, “Federalism in Peril,” *Frontline*, April, 2021, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/federalism-in-peril-as-gnctd-amendment-act-and-other-acts-adopted-by-narendra-modi-govt-and-other-bjp-state-govts-fit-into-sangh-parivar-long-term-project-of-dismantling-institutions-anathema-to-hindu-ethos/article34233209.ece>.

⁵¹ I. Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); P. Chacko, *Indian Foreign Policy: The Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947 to 2004* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), <https://www.routledge.com/Indian-Foreign-Policy-The-Politics-of-Postcolonial-Identity-from-1947-to/Chacko/p/book/9781138843868>.

⁵² Asthana and Jacob, “Federalism and foreign affairs,” 315–332.

effective implementation of policy. This is widely reflected in the north-eastern states, where many local stakeholders are opposed to the execution of the Act East Policy and frustrate high politics moves to enact policy choices largely framed through the eyes of the Centre in many ways. In other words, one part of the study of domestic and foreign policy in India concerns how issues are debated within the political and civil society, by forces who are not represented by political parties constituting governments at the state level.

Case studies: West Bengal, Assam and the Northeast

The study now takes up three cases that illustrate the point that the dynamics shaping federalism and foreign policy do not just involve the Centre and the states, but goes far down and effuses sideways as well. These are the political trends in the border districts of West Bengal, the increasing prominence of Assam in India's foreign policy, and the debates over the Look/Act East in the northeast. The recent enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 and the revival of the National Register for Citizens (NRC) by the BJP⁵³ government has officially granted citizenship to religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, significantly excluding Muslims. These have proved to be two policy threads which could potentially unite these three regions at three normative levels. Firstly, the narrative of polarization between Hindus and Muslims with a clear bias being displayed by the Centre to the Hindu refugees in Bangladesh.⁵⁴ Secondly, the contestations between the natives in Assam, Northeast and Bengal and the illegal migrants from Bangladesh who are typically deported or sent to detention centres. Finally, the protests gathering momentum in these states (post the Citizenship amendment legislation in India, 2019) which are playing a crucial role in India's broader foreign relations with Bangladesh, over the issues of communalization of politics, immigration and citizenship.⁵⁵

West Bengal: The complexities of the state's role in the federal process of foreign policy making are evidenced clearly by West Bengal for it has directly played with the larger matrix of India-Bangladesh relations in dual ways. First, as the state sharing the longest border with Bangladesh and nesting multiple bordering districts, it has staked a claim in the decision-making process conducted by the Centre

⁵³ P. Raj, "Understanding Citizenship and Refugees' Status in India," *Econ Polit Wkly* 55, no. 23 (2020), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/23/perspectives/understanding-citizenship-and-refugees-status.html>.

⁵⁴"BJP Promises Indian citizenship for Bangladeshi Hindu refugees," *The Economic Times*, April 26, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bjp-promises-indian-citizenship-for-bangladeshi-hindu-refugees/articleshow/47059518.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵⁵ R. Thapar *et al.*, *On Citizenship* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2021), <https://www.alephbookcompany.com/book/on-citizenship/>.

on major issues of resource-sharing and cross-border tensions.⁵⁶ Secondly, with the BJP gaining momentum in the politics of the state and harbouring ambitions of electoral victory since 2016, many issues between the two countries have been appropriated by the BJP, to diminish the popularity as well as credibility of the current Trinamool regime. Their campaign of intense communal polarization has reshaped the politics of the state, as well as the cross-border issues of illegal migration and cattle-smuggling with Bangladesh.⁵⁷ Both these aspects shall be discussed in this section.

The prevalent intellectual view is that while the current Trinamool (TMC) state government was responsible for hampering efforts by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the Centre to cement ties with Bangladesh, by opposing the Teesta water sharing agreement and other proposals between 2013–2014.⁵⁸ However, the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi succeeded in turning the situation around and the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, played a constructive role in the two countries ultimately achieving the Land Boundary Agreement and the exchange of enclaves that had created difficulties in their bilateral ties for decades. The UPA government signed a Land Boundary protocol with Bangladesh in 2011 to introduce the 119th Constitution Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha. But an attempt to implement this in 2013 witnessed stiff opposition from the West Bengal Government and the North East MPs Forum. The matter was finally resolved in June 2015 during Modi's visit to Dhaka and Assam and West Bengal governments played a key role in brokering a win-win situation at the political level. Though the issue of Teesta water-sharing still remains unresolved,⁵⁹ throwing light on the rising significance of state consent in Indian federalism, the late Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj (under the BJP regime) had observed that the West Bengal government is a “key stakeholder and the Centre must engage with it to resolve the matter”.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ I. Hossain, “Bangladesh-India Relations: The Ganges Water-Sharing Treaty and Beyond,” *Asian Aff* 25, no. 3 (1998): 131–150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30172438>; M.M. Rahaman, “Principles of Transboundary Water Resources Management and Ganges Treaties: An Analysis,” *Int J Water Resour D* 25, no. 1 (2009): 159–173, https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/bibliography/articles/general/Rahaman-Ganges-Water_Res_Devel.pdf; A. Sood and B.K.P. Mathukumalli, “Managing international river basins: reviewing India-Bangladesh transboundary water issues,” *International Journal of River Basin Management* 9, no. 1 (2011): 43–52; B.C. Upreti, “Indo-Bangladesh Water Dispute,” in *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh*, ed. S.R. Chakravarty (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publication, 1994).

⁵⁷ A. Ghosal, “Teesta Water Deal: One Issue where Mamata loses Nothing by sitting tight,” *Hindustan Times*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/teesta-water-deal-one-issue-where-mamata-loses-nothing-by-sitting-tight/story-ai4NVPYOD12Prs3r5S13dO.html>.

⁵⁸ Ghosal, “Teesta Water Deal.”

⁵⁹ A. Sinha, “Mamata Turns Up Heat on Teesta water-sharing,” *The Telegraph Online*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/mamata-turns-up-heat-on-teesta-water-sharing/cid/1808809>.

⁶⁰ “Indian govt cannot bypass West Bengal over Teesta issue: Sushma,” *Daily Star*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/teesta-water-sharing-treaty-indian-government-cannot-bypass-west-bengal-sushma-swaraj-1582813>.

The 2015 state visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh, accompanied by West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, failed to change the fundamental dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh ties.⁶¹ However, the visit did successfully address two major concerns; Bangladesh's craving for equal and dignified treatment and assurance from India of a serious commitment to invest in the Teesta Agreement.⁶² As a major boost to connectivity, both countries agreed to allow Indian cargo vessels to ferry goods through Chittangong port, bypassing Singapore in the process.⁶³ The Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus services inaugurated by Prime Ministers Modi and Hasina, in company with Mamata Banerjee, underlined India's commitment to further connectivity.⁶⁴ Another crucial outcome of the visit was the exchange of the Instruments of Ratification of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement.⁶⁵ While implementation of the agreement has remained widely undefined,⁶⁶ the fact that India could cede 10,000 acres of land to Bangladesh, despite strong protests from state BJP in Assam, could be a major achievement.

Mamata Banerjee's support for the deal, announced during her visit to Bangladesh in February 2015, greatly facilitated the ratification process on India's side.⁶⁷ Thus, the positive relations between the two countries indicate that while the priorities of geopolitics will remain, commerce and connectivity have seriously

⁶¹ C.D. Sahay, "Prime Minister Modi's Visit to Bangladesh: A Review," Vivekananda International Foundation, June 10, 2015, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2015/june/10/prime-minister-modi-s-visit-to-bangladesh-a-review>.

⁶² "PM Modi's landmark Bangladesh visit," *The Economic Times*, June 6, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nation-world/pm-narendra-modis-landmark-bangladesh-visit/pm-modi-with-mamata-banerjee-in-bangladesh/slideshow/47566791.cms>.

⁶³ J. Bhattacharjee, "Bangladesh: New Boost to Maritime Connectivity with India," Observer Research Foundation, August 13, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bangladesh-new-boost-to-maritime-connectivity-with-india/>.

⁶⁴ "PM Narendra Modi Returns Home after Two-Day Bangladesh Visit," NDTV, Press Trust of India, June 7, 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-returns-home-after-two-day-bangladesh-visit-769582>.

⁶⁵ India and Bangladesh share a land boundary stretching approximately 4,100 km, which was determined by the 1947 Radcliffe Award as the India-East Pakistan Land Boundary. There were settlements all along this border that cut across the international border, thereby creating untold hardships in the lives of people living there. This took a long time to settle. After years of negotiation and stonewalling, the Protocol to the Land Boundary Act (LBA) of 1974 was signed in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, on 6th September 2011, which was then ratified in the national legislatures of both the countries and became a legal instrument on June 6, 2015; S. Chatterjee, "India-Bangladesh Relations: Geopolitics or Human Security?," in *Eastward Ho: India's Relations with the Indo-Pacific*, ed. E. Sridharan (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, June 2021), 216–246.

⁶⁶ S. Banerjee and A. Guha, "The 2015 India-Bangladesh land boundary agreement: Identifying constraints and exploring possibilities in Cooch Behar," Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper, July 13, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-2015-india-bangladesh-land-boundary-agreement-identifying-constraints-and-exploring-possibilities-in-cooch-behar/>.

⁶⁷ "Enclave exchange: Historic and memorable day, says Mamata Banerjee," *India Today*, August 1, 2015, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/west-bengal/story/mamata-banerjee-hails-transfer-of-chit-mahal-enclaves-as-historic-one-285845-2015-08-01>.

started to rival the recursive dynamics of power. Federalizing foreign policy has helped create the political capital necessary for sustaining the relationship, despite much bitterness and resentment on both sides. On issues like water and migration, it is impossible to placate local fears by invoking national interest. A foreign policy that is out of sync with reality on the ground, cannot deliver effective change. Hence, the active involvement of the politicians of West Bengal and other neighbouring states in India's dealings with Bangladesh, is not necessarily a reprehensible constraint. Rather, it resonates the spirit of accommodation and inclusivity that characterizes Indian federalism.

In fact, Ms. Banerjee has advocated for better communication ties and economic relations between West Bengal and Bangladesh.⁶⁸ However, the political dynamics in West Bengal changed rapidly in 2016, when the BJP emerged as the principal political contender to the ruling TMC.⁶⁹ The organizational basis of the Left party, which had ruled the state for more than three decades and that of the Congress, which had ruled from 1947 till the 1970s have collapsed, turning the BJP into a potential game-changer.⁷⁰ Linking this domestic development with foreign policy dynamics, is the allegedly Muslim appeasement policies of the TMC regime. These include underplaying, if not encouraging, Bengali Muslim migration from Bangladesh.⁷¹ This has contributed to a role reversal in the standpoints of the two parties in regards to Bangladesh (India has traditionally stopped Muslim influx from Bangladesh), when it comes to the thorny issue of migration that has long plagued relations between India and Bangladesh.⁷²

The BJP's major contention is the issue of illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh.⁷³ These migrants, the party claims, threaten to alter the demographic character of the bordering districts and are primarily responsible for a spate of criminal activities in the state.⁷⁴ According to the BJP, since the TMC is not a

⁶⁸ "Relation between Bengal and Bangladesh beyond borders: Mamata Banerje," *Indian Express*, December 15, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/relation-between-bengal-and-bangladesh-beyond-borders-mamata-banerjee-4429004/>.

⁶⁹ S. Gupta, "The rise of the BJP in West Bengal," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-rise-of-the-bjp-in-west-bengal/article27140846.ece>.

⁷⁰ S. Bagchi, "Bengal through the Decades: The More Things Change, Have They Stayed the Same?," ORF Occasional Paper No. 310, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bengal-through-the-decades/>.

⁷¹ M. Bose, "Amidst Covid-19 fire, Hindu-Muslim polarisation in Bengal's biggest poll factor," *India Today*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/west-bengal-assembly-polls-2021/story/amidst-covid-19-fire-hindu-muslim-polarisation-is-bengal-s-biggest-poll-factor-1795300-2021-04-27>; R. Datta, "Mamata's Muslim Gameplan," *India Today*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20210125-mamata-s-muslim-gameplan-1759579-2021-01-17>.

⁷² A. Kashem and S. Islam, "Narendra Modi's Bangladesh Policy and India-Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses," *India Q* 72, no. 3 (2016): 250–267.

⁷³ M. Gillan, "Refugees or infiltrators? The Bhartiya Janata Party and illegal migration from Bangladesh," *Asian Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2002): 73–95.

⁷⁴ Gillan, "Refugees or infiltrators?," 73–95.

cadre-based party (organizationally structured), and is organizationally volatile and inherently fractious, the only way it can politically survive is through the appeasement of fundamentalist Muslim groups, who not only ensure bloc voting but also provide the foot soldiers for all disruptive activities.⁷⁵ The other part of the narrative is based on the partial and biased use of state administration, be it the bureaucracy or police forces, to affect what can be considered a distinct pro-Muslim tilt, in addition to deliberately shelter the Muslim rioters and harass the BJP/RSS workers who stood up to this seemingly criminal behaviour and attempts to silence the press and social media, so that incidents of minority violence against the ‘Hindus’ did not spread to other regions.⁷⁶ The BJP has also tapped the pockets of local disturbances following the Rohingya crisis in India’s eastern borders,⁷⁷ to highlight how the local TMC units are smuggling in Muslim Rohingya refugees surreptitiously but in connivance with local administration.⁷⁸

While the disquietude rooted in religious identity has not crossed the acceptable threshold and exploded into a full-scale war, the international border with Bangladesh and events in neighbouring provinces, may polarize votes along communal lines in West Bengal. The province emerged as a sanctuary for terror operatives (since 2007) belonging to radical religious groups such as *Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh* (HuJI-B) and *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), who were on the run after the Awami League government in Dhaka began a sustained military campaign against them between 2005–2007.⁷⁹ The West Bengal-Bangladesh border, despite fencing and coordination of security personnel of both India and Bangladesh, is porous.⁸⁰ The TMCs lack of vigilance on cross-border infiltration and

⁷⁵ Bose, “Amidst Covid-19 fire”; Datta, “Mamata’s Muslim Gameplan.”

⁷⁶ “Revisiting West Bengal’s chequered history of political violence,” *The Economic Times*, August 21, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/revisiting-west-bengals-chequered-history-of-political-violence/articleshow/85510632.cms?from=mdr>; T. Chatterjee, “Appeaser versus outsider-the battle of narratives in Bengal polls,” *Hindustan Times*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/appeaser-versus-outsider-the-battle-of-narratives-in-bengal-polls-101617886785961.html>.

⁷⁷ The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic minority group living mostly in Myanmar. They are different from the mainstream population of Myanmar, speaking a dialectic closely related to Bengali. While the Rohingyas were long targeted by the Myanmar state, the military triggered an operation against them following an attack by one of underground insurgent groups consisting of Rohingyas in August 2017. This quickly led to something akin to an ethnic cleansing and the displaced Rohingyas took shelter mostly in Bangladesh though some, estimated around 40,000 took refuge in India. Unfortunately, in the politically charged atmosphere in West Bengal, which shares a very porous and contentious border with Bangladesh, the Rohingya issue got politicized. The then West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh complained, “I have urged the CEC to look into reports suggesting that names of Rohingyas have been included in the voters’ list in certain parts of state, including the border areas. I have called upon the EC to scrutinise the list to detect all such irregularities,” *PTI*, January, 2021.

⁷⁸ “PM Narendra Modi Returns Home.”

⁷⁹ R. Sudh, “PART 2: Behind the Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami,” 2004, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/FL10Df06.html.

⁸⁰ A.J. Majumdar, “Making Sense of India–Bangladesh Relations,” *India Q* 70, no. 4 (2014): 327–340.

dependence on a number of conservative Muslim organizations, enabled a number of notorious Huji-B and JMB operatives to take shelter in West Bengal between 2013–2017.⁸¹ This was evident in the 2014 accidental blast in Khagragarh, in the Burdwan district, which literally exposed the JMB's secret activities and sleeper-cells in West Bengal.⁸² The connection between unregistered madrasas, the unguarded and easily penetrable rural backyards and the terror cells exploded with the blast in Khagragarh, Burdwan. The politics of denial and initial disclaimers of the TMC government, alluded to a hidden but sinister political agenda, of providing shelter to radical terror groups, in case any punitive action against them would politically backfire to the party.⁸³

Reaping benefits from the sharp Hindu-Muslim polarization and infiltration across the border, the BJP has done spectacularly well in many of the bordering districts of West Bengal. It won in eight border constituencies in the Lok Sabha polls in 2019 with a substantial minority vote.⁸⁴ Their electoral success is undeniably due to the consolidation of the Hindu vote in these places, particularly among the lower caste groups.⁸⁵ This leadership remains hostile to any concessions to Bangladesh and will not compromise, even if long-term 'national interest' demands improving ties with Bangladesh.⁸⁶ The political compulsion of the TMC, with increasing allegations of corruption and anti-incumbency breathing down its neck, has forced it to invoke appeals of Bengali nationalism. Bengalis are the natives of West Bengal as a state and also constitute the majority of the population in Bangladesh, which makes the party even more reliant on consolidating Muslim votes and underplaying the immigration issue for now.⁸⁷ What this shows, therefore, is the exceedingly complex nature of federal political dynamics, that cannot be mapped straight-forward to conclude foreign policy effects. There is no simple algorithm at work here; the dynamics are not about any regular competition between the

⁸¹ S. Khan and A. Sen, "Jamaat Terror shadow over India," *The Pioneer*, 2017, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/columnists/jamaat-terror-shadow-over-india.html>.

⁸² "Bangladeshi terrorist gets 29-yr jail term for Khagragarh bomb blast in Bengal," *Hindustan Times*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bangladeshi-terrorist-gets-29-yr-jail-term-for-bomb-blast-in-bengal-s-khagragarh-10161296433228.html>.

⁸³ Sudh, "PART 2: Behind."

⁸⁴ "BJP Wins in Bengal border areas with high Muslim population," *Business Standard*, June 5, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/bjp-wins-in-bengal-border-areas-with-high-muslim-population-119060500583_1.html.

⁸⁵ R. Kishore, "3 Crucial take aways from Bengal results," *Hindustan Times*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/3-crucial-takeaways-from-bengal-results-101620086556255.html>.

⁸⁶ A. Banerji, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations Following the West Bengal Elections," *South Asian Voices*, May 17, 2021, <https://southasianvoices.org/indo-bangladesh-relations-following-the-west-bengal-elections/>.

⁸⁷ "Ponzi Schemes and Corruption in West Bengal: A Reading List," *EPW Engage*, 2019, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/ponzi-schemes-corruption-west-bengal-tmc-mamata-banerjee>.

Centre claiming foreign policy autonomy based a consistent reading of national interest and a state (that is West Bengal) opposed to it. BJP's political moves in West Bengal are intimately related to the broader citizenship debates underway in India. For the BJP, the game changer is to effectively target the Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh who have a significant presence in West Bengal's demographics. Thus, linking of the citizenship issue with immigration on the one hand, and has been juxtaposed with BJP's electoral ambitions in the state, and this has fused the fate of West Bengal and India's relations with Bangladesh, and by extension, its integral involvement in the Centre's decision-making in the future.

Assam: Assam offers another interesting case of contrasts. On the one hand, Assam's importance in terms of India's security thinking and foreign relations with eastern neighbours, has increased considerably since the inception of its Look East Policy in 1991. Assam was invariably viewed through the lens of conflict management by the Indian states and years of insurgency and migration-induced disturbances marginalized its role, despite its strategic location.⁸⁸ Four factors changed this scenario. First, the violence has ebbed considerably in recent times; second, India's investments into ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar could not have succeeded without the cooperation of this pivotal north-eastern state; and, thirdly, the rise of the BJP as a major political party changed the underlying dynamics fundamentally.⁸⁹ Finally, as India consolidated its Look East policy, and Modi tweaked it into the Act East mode since 2014, a new politics of connectivity emerged in the region.⁹⁰ Assam is a key state in India's efforts to revive its old connections to the east. Additionally, with the decline of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and the growing appeal of sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) in particular.⁹¹ India's relations with Bhutan and Myanmar assumed a new profile. Bhutan's critical role in flushing out the anti-Indian insurgent forces further underscored the need for closer strategic coordination and infrastructure development that inevitably put the spotlight on Assam.⁹²

⁸⁸ N. Datta, *Questions of Identity of Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012), <https://www.biblio.com/book/questions-identity-assam-location-migration-hybridity/d/1037655035>.

⁸⁹ N. Mukhopadhyay, "Putting the BJP's electoral success in the northeast in context," 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/3/10/putting-the-bjps-electoral-success-in-the-northeast-in-context>.

⁹⁰ S. Chatterjee, "Conceptions of Space in India's Look East Policy: Order, Cooperation or Community?," *South Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (2007): 65–81; K.K. Prasad, "India Looks Far East: A growing presence in the Pacific Islands could have significant benefits for India," *The Diplomat*, April 28, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/india-looks-far-east/>.

⁹¹ A.B.R. Chaudhury and R.R. Rai, "Towards a Deliberative BIMSTEC," August 6, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/towards-a-deliberative-bimstec>.

⁹² P. Kumar, "External linkages and internal security: Assessing Bhutan's operation all clear," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 3 (2004): 390–410, https://idsa.in/system/files/strategicanalysis_pkumar_0904.pdf.

The state became vital to India's opening up to the east as the proposed Guwahati-Chittagong Corridor⁹³ and the Guwahati-Kunming Corridor⁹⁴ are crucial to this vision of regional connectivity.

The growing realization that the success of the Act East initiative depends critically on the role that the north-eastern states play. Assam is indeed the front-line actor, which has gradually increased the significance of Assam in the national imagination, and the need to hear its voices carefully became an imperative. For instance, Assam's cooperation was essential in finalizing the Land Border Agreement (LBA), concluded in 2015, with Bangladesh, though it involved a rather tortuous process of bargaining that showcased the capacity of the state to withstand federal pressure on sensitive issues.⁹⁵ Assam's role as a 'regional foreign policy connector', to use the words of Indrajit Sharma, is now an undeniable fact, that promises a lot more attention to the state than before and makes its cooperation crucial to India's foreign policy with the eastern neighbours.⁹⁶ India's federalism is not only a model to respond to its incredible diversity but is also a framework for development. Assam's case highlights how the salience of political territory is getting questioned under the prevailing circumstances, where a new politics of connectivity rather than insular development, is needed. In a nutshell, the roles and functions of the north-eastern states bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh in the domain of national security has moved on.⁹⁷ Assam has automatically become crucial to this new politics of connectivity as the proposed roadways from Bhutan to Myanmar must pass through its territories.⁹⁸

However, the new experiments in spatial connectivity by itself cannot explain the prominence of the state. Much of this prominence is indeed the function of the political ascension of the BJP in the northeast in general and in the state of

⁹³ B. Singh, "India to dredge Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Chittagong Port: Nitin Gadkari," *The Economic Times*, April 4, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-to-dredge-brahmaputra-from-sadiya-to-chittagong-port-nitin-gadkari/articleshow/58011805.cms?from=mdr>.

⁹⁴ "Act East Policy," Assam State Portal, last modified January 30, 2022, <https://assam.gov.in/business/438>.

⁹⁵ A.S. Bhasin, "BJP Must Not Oppose India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement," 2013, http://www.udyaindia.in/english/content_20april2013/viewpoint1.html.

⁹⁶ I. Sharma, "The Growing Role of Assam in India's Foreign Policy," *Eurasia Review*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27062017-the-growing-role-of-assam-in-indias-foreign-policy/>.

⁹⁷ B.R. Borthakur, "Internal Security Scenario of North East India," *Indian Defence Review* 30, no. 1 (2015), <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/internal-security-scenario-of-north-east-india/>.

⁹⁸ "Assam NRC authority seeks re-verification of citizens' list," *The Hindu*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-nrc-authority-seeks-re-verification-of-citizens-list/article34548812.ece>.

Assam in particular.⁹⁹ The BJP's political narrative in Assam¹⁰⁰ highlights four key aspects – first, its apparent success on bringing down insurgency and improving the security situation. Secondly, its capacity to deliver on infrastructural projects as it is the dominant federal party as well. Thirdly, its blueprint to harness local resources and galvanize indigenous entrepreneurial skills through the Act East policy, and finally, its commitment to preserve the distinctive identity of the region by fighting illegal migration head on.¹⁰¹ Its success was largely due to its skilful political engineering.¹⁰² It managed to win over local leaders in good numbers, which paid a healthy electoral dividend to the party.¹⁰³ In Assam, in particular, the BJP emphasized how the illegal migrants were changing the ethnic and cultural character of the state (the region as a whole by extension) and promised that the party would reverse this by an expeditious implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC); not only in Assam but in many other states as well.¹⁰⁴ This has been the ploy to fight the discontent against the Citizens Amendment Act, an act which also migrant Hindus from states like Bangladesh and Myanmar to claim citizenship status.

The CAA would invariably increase the number of the migrant population in the region. However, the BJP argued that the burden for their relocation and settlement would not have to be borne by the north-eastern states alone. Its electoral strategy emphasizing pragmatic development, did succeed in turning adverse attention away from the CAA issue.¹⁰⁵ The point here is that while this strategy has worked electorally in Assam and in some north-eastern states, it has also changed the political narrative in Assam drastically. This involves a paradox. On the one hand, with Hindu sentiments on the rise in Assam since BJP's electoral victory in 2016, it will indeed carry more weight in political decisions affecting the state,

⁹⁹ "Rise in the East helps Bharatiya Janta Party Clinch Assam," *The Hindu*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/assam-assembly/analysis-rise-in-the-east-helps-bharatiya-janta-party-clinch-assam/article34472730.ece>.

¹⁰⁰ T. Agarwala, "Amit Shah: Assam rejected insurgency, agitations, chose development by voting BJP," *The Indian Express*, July 26, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/amit-shah-assam-rejected-insurgency-agitations-chose-development-by-voting-bjp-7421999/>.

¹⁰¹ IDSA Issue Brief, "Bangladeshi Illegal Migration into Assam: Issues and Concerns from the Field," New Delhi, 2021, http://www.idsa.in/system/files/IB_BangladeshIllegalMigrationintoAssam.pdf.

¹⁰² S. Saikia, "Saffronizing the periphery: Explaining the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in contemporary Assam," *Stud Ind Polit* 8, no. 1 (2020): 69–84.

¹⁰³ Saikia, "Saffronizing the periphery," 69–84.

¹⁰⁴ K. Gupta, "Beyond the Poll Rhetoric of BJP's Contentious Citizenship Amendment Bill," ORF Special Report No. 89, Observer Research Foundation, 2019, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ORF_SpecialReport_89_BJP-CAB.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ V. Bijukumar, "North East India. Development Rhetoric, Ethnic Anxieties," *Econ Polit Wkly* 54, no. 25 (2019), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/25/commentary/north-east-india.html>.

be it regional, foreign or domestic. On the other hand, the acrimonious language of the NRC debate and its impending prospects of millions becoming stateless, threaten a politics of xenophobia and exclusion whose consequences will impact negatively upon India's relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar.

In the words of Meenakshi Ganguly, "The four million in Assam who have been unable to prove their citizenship include both Hindus and Muslims, but with the shrill muscular nationalism that the Bharatiya Janata Party promotes, the claim often heard is that these are all illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh."¹⁰⁶ As this discourse unravels, problems with Bangladesh will return. The Awami League under PM Hasina has taken steps to improve relations with India but concessions from India had been slow to materialize. These steps included closing down insurgent camps and stopping Bangladesh's territory from being used for anti-India activities.¹⁰⁷ If the politics of exclusion centred on the NRC becoming the dominant political narrative of Assam, this would be ominous for India-Bangladesh relations in the future.¹⁰⁸ Up to now, 19,00,000 people have been left out of 3,10,00,000 applicants in the final draft of the NRC published in August 2019. Of these, around 1,08,000 are doubtful voters.¹⁰⁹ With the demand for the re-verification process still pending before the Supreme Court¹¹⁰ these excluded names have an uncertain future. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Hemanta Biswas is preparing for the Census to be published this year, asserting that it is not connected to the NRC in anyway. But opposition parties claim that the concept of a National Register of Citizens and a National Population Register was introduced through an amendment of the Citizenship Act of 1955 and the rules framed there under by the Vajpayee government in 2003. The rules clearly stated that the NRC will be finalised after the verification of the National Population Register. The NPR is at present in the first stage of the NRC.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ M. Ganguly, "NRC debate: Why Assam's handling of the exercise will have repercussions for the rest of India," 2018, <https://scroll.in/article/889324/nrc-debate-why-assams-handling-of-the-exercise-will-have-repercussions-for-the-rest-of-india>.

¹⁰⁷ "Modi meets Hasina; India Bangladesh sign five MOUs," *The Hindu*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/prime-minister-narendra-modi-meets-bangladesh-counterpart-sheikh-hasina-in-dhaka/article34177147.ece>.

¹⁰⁸ S. Bhowmick, "NRC In Assam: Why India-Bangladesh Ties May Take A Hit," *The Outlook*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/assams-nrc-opens-a-pandoras-box/314312>.

¹⁰⁹ U. Parashar, "Over 19 lakh excluded, 3.1 crore included in Assam NRC final list," *Hindustan Times*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/assam-nrc-1-9-million-names-excluded-from-final-list/story-KOIZwevNzXIKgrhpbDZvIO.html>.

¹¹⁰ "Rohingyas figure in Bengal voter list, says State BJP chief Dilip Ghosh," *The Hindu*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly/rohingyas-figure-in-bengal-voter-list-says-state-bjp-chief-dilip-ghosh/article33630254.ece>.

¹¹¹ P. Karat, "It is incumbent upon state governments who are against CAA to ensure that NPR updation process doesn't take place," *National Herald*, 2021, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/it-is-incumbent-upon-state-govts-which-are-against-caa-to-ensure-that-npr-updation-process-doesnt-take-place>; N.G. Mahanta, *Citizenship Debate over NRC and CAA: Assam and the Politics of History* (London: Sage, 2021).

Combined with a spate of riots against minority Hindus in Bangladesh frequently, the polarization discourse has been fuelled, straining Indo-Bangladesh relations.¹¹² This is amidst the cry for justice by members of right-wing religious outfits like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, to legally account for the perpetrators of vandalism and violence which killed at least six people and injured hundreds in October 2021, during the Bengali Hindu religious festival of Durga Puja.¹¹³ Political voices from both the states have assured that the diplomatic relations must continue unscathed, as religious fundamentalists try to derail the friendship between the two neighbours.¹¹⁴ However, this narrative of friendly foreign relations drafted by the Centre sits oddly with the insecurities and disempowerment of the people in the state, who remain anxious and even clueless about their future.

This case shows that the role of a province in the making of foreign policy decisions is both complex and intervening in nature. This study's central argument remains: the complexities of state and local politics must be sufficiently factored into the making of the foreign policy of a state. The usual story of a homogenous state, devoid of local intricacies, directing the national foreign policy choices is empirically unsubstantiated and conceptually fallacious. Assam is indeed a state that now matters crucially in India's foreign policy calculus in the eastern neighbourhood, but its role is neither seamless nor consistent. If it has emerged as a key state in India's regional imagination, its domestic political compulsions may complicate India's difficult ties with its neighbours.

Look/Act East and the Northeast: Finally, we argue that while the Indian state may involve the provinces more actively in foreign policy, foreign policy remains a tool of mainstreaming states through strategies of co-option and coordination. In other words, a more active participation by the states does not necessarily mean that the policy is democratically arrived at through a process of dialogue where all stakeholders have at least an equal right to articulate their views. The Look/Act East policy is our chosen example here.

As the post-Cold War period ushered a paradigm shift for the Indian economy, following large-scale economic liberalization, the then Prime Minister of India, Mr. P.V Narsimha Rao, highlighted his vision for India to become a tiger economy, based on the similar developmental models that led to exponential economic

¹¹²S. Daniyal, "Why Bangladesh warned India over anti-Hindu riots, even as Modi government praised Dhaka's response," *Scroll*, October 19, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/1007964/why-bangladesh-warned-india-over-anti-hindu-riots-even-though-modi-government-praised-it>.

¹¹³A. Bhaumik, "Despite violence, India keeping Bangladesh ties on track," *Deccan Herald*, 2021, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/despite-violence-india-keeping-bangladesh-ties-on-track-1047443.html>.

¹¹⁴S.N. Bhatnagar, "Making sense of New Delhi's restrained response to Bangladesh's anti-Hindu violence," *South Asia Monitor*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/jottings/making-sense-new-delhis-restrained-response-bangladeshs-anti-hindu-violence>.

growth in several East Asian states.¹¹⁵ Aimed at fostering strong economic and maritime partnerships, this initiative was termed the “Look East Policy”. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) welcomed these reforms and, as a part of a larger reconciliation in bilateral relations, it granted India the status of a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, for research and collaboration in business, technology and tourism.¹¹⁶ Following more than two decades of its trajectory and some success in its operational dynamics, the Look East Policy found a newer, invigorated version. India’s Act East Policy (AEP) was unveiled at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in 2014, held in Nay Pyi Taw. In his opening statement on the occasion, Modi said: “A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India’s ‘Look East Policy’ has become ‘Act East Policy’.”¹¹⁷ Scholars highlight that while the Look East policy was only covering economics and diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia, the change of leadership and the coming of Narendra Modi witnessed the expansion of the policy into security coverage and defence throughout Asia Pacific.¹¹⁸ India decided to play a more strategic role in the region and deepening ties with Japan, Vietnam and Australia.¹¹⁹

Under the AEP, the India-Japan strategic partnership has been lifted to an entirely new level, underscoring the importance of Indo-Pacific cooperation.¹²⁰ Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar said, “We are looking at a complex set of transformations that are simultaneously underway. The Indo-Pacific is witnessing both multi-polarity and rebalancing.”¹²¹ India believes in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive, and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order. In his Keynote Address at the Shangri La Dialogue on 1st June

¹¹⁵ R. Nair, “How Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh rescued India in 1991 and made history,” *The Print*, July 23, 2021, <https://theprint.in/economy/how-narasimha-rao-and-manmohan-singh-rescued-india-in-1991-and-made-history/700893/>.

¹¹⁶ V. Dewan, “India’s Act East Policy: Strategic Rationales and Maritime Strategy,” *Security Distillery*, 2021, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/indias-act-east-policy-strategic-rationales-and-maritime-strategy>.

¹¹⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, “Opening Statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar,” cited in U.B. Singh, “Significance of India’s Act East Policy and Engagement with ASEAN,” Monahora Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, https://idsa.in/backgroundunder/significance-india-act-east-policy-and-engagement-with-asean-ubsingh_041218, 2014, <http://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/SpeechStatementASEM.htm?dtl/22566/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>.

¹¹⁸ A. Mazumdar, “From “Look East” to “Act East”: India’s evolving engagement with the Asia-Pacific Region,” *Asian Aff* 52, no. 2 (2021): 357–374.

¹¹⁹ S. Ekaputra and C. Hennida, “National Attributes on Foreign Policy: India Act East Policy,” in *Proceedings of Airlangga Conference on International Relations (ACIR 2018)-Politics, Economy and Security in Changing Indo-Pacific Region* (Science and Technology Publications, Lda, 2021), 575–580, <https://www.scitepress.org/Papers/2018/102805/102805.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Prasad, “India Looks Far East.”

¹²¹ “Indo-Pacific is witnessing both multi-polarity and rebalancing: Jaishankar,” *The New Indian Express*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/dec/24/indo-pacific-is-witnessing-both-multi-polarity-and-rebalancing-jaishankar-2399352.html>.

2018, PM Modi pointed out, “Our interests in the region are vast, and our engagement is deep. In the Indian Ocean region, our relationships are becoming stronger. We are also helping build economic capabilities and improve maritime security for our friends and partners.”¹²² ASEAN’s centrality remains the abiding contemporary characteristic of the Indo-Pacific at the regional level. India has placed the ‘Indo-Pacific’ at the heart of its engagement with the countries of South, Southeast and East Asia. In 2018, in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had advocated a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region”.¹²³ He had, in addition, called for common commitment, based on shared values and principles, to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, in a way, the Act ‘East’ is getting transformed into Act ‘Indo-Pacific’.¹²⁴

Notwithstanding the drivers of foreign policy and the rights of the Centre to mobilize the Northeast, the argument in this study runs along the following lines. There is a robust official narrative from the Look/Act East policy,¹²⁵ which assumes a statist perspective and is created by the national political elite and foreign policy mandarins envisioning to liberate the northeast the region from its claustrophobic insularity. The official Indian narrative claims postcolonial wisdom to unlock development in a region bedevilled by several problems. This narrative receives support of the politicians from the northeast, who require the federal support and patronage to politically survive. A good illustration of this was the Assam-Mizoram border confrontation that saw angry spate of words from the Chief Ministers of both Assam and Mizoram, two of India’s north-eastern states. The conflict led to police action and the filing of FIRS against both Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and K Vanlalvena, a Mizo National Front (MNF) Minister of Parliament (MP). It was ultimately resolved through the intervention by the Union Government with both parties agreeing to the deployment of the Central forces to resolve the dispute.¹²⁶ To that extent, the Look East/Act East is an attempt to save the struggling region, which needs to be opened to the wider

¹²² Ministry of External Affairs, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue,” 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

¹²³ H. Siddiqui, “India’s concept of Indo-Pacific is inclusive and across oceans,” Ministry of External Affairs, November 8, 2019, https://mea.gov.in/articles-in-indian-media.htm?dtl/32015/Indias_concept_of_IndoPacific_is_inclusive_and_across_oceans.

¹²⁴ P. De, “India’s Act East policy is slowly becoming Act Indo-Pacific policy under Modi government,” *The Print*, March 27, 2020, <https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/india-act-east-policy-is-becoming-act-indo-pacific/389502/>.

¹²⁵ A. Sajjanhar, “From Look East to Act East: Semantics or Substance,” MEA Distinguished lectures, February 11, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?213>.

¹²⁶ S. Hazarika, “Act East policy’s success rests on peace and trust between neighbours,” *The Indian Express*, August 9, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/assam-mizoram-border-dispute-act-east-policy-7444741/>.

neighbourhood of Southeast and East Asia. It sought to do this by increasing connectivity and opening up the region to greater infrastructural and commercial investments. As Ashok Sajjanhar recently observed, while a strong partnership with Southeast, East Asia and Indo-Pacific countries will strengthen India's Act East policy, it would also gradually remove the economic isolation of India's East and North East.¹²⁷

However, what does 'opening up' mean? Does it mean allowing free movement of production materials across artificial borders? Or is it about allowing local communities to decide how they wish to connect and open up to the 'East'? In a sense, the policy is an attempt to overcome the geographical constraints of the landlocked Northeast. The policy perspective is to let the region grow economically by connecting with Southeast Asian economies.¹²⁸ Connectivity and economic enterprise were expected to ultimately break the shackles of poverty and insurgency.¹²⁹ However, this official discourse was, like all previous developmental models tried in this region, was a national construction that had little understanding of local traditions, and, more crucially, no patience for alternatives discourses based on different cartographic imaginations. Policy-makers choose to gloss over the fact that this region had always enjoyed social connectivity before the colonial rulers territorialized all interactions.¹³⁰ Without a meaningful approach to migration and refugee issues, the proposed politics of connectivity will only be another official effort to achieve vertical integration of a region. In such cases, the region is either perceived by the state as a marketable resource or a security threat depending on what happens on the ground.¹³¹ The formal involvement of some pliable state politicians and bureaucrats with the policy does not necessarily make states sufficiently represented in policy making.

A recent study observes, in keeping with the larger regional goals of integration and development under the Act East Policy, that it is very important to create local stakeholders to enable the policy to flourish over a long period of time. Addressing internal and external security concerns effectively alongside the creation of opportunities for investment would be crucial. This would not only lend a sufficient degree of strength to the Act East initiative, but also address the vital criticism of failing to engage a region and its people who are otherwise critical to the

¹²⁷ Hazarika, "Act East policy's success."

¹²⁸ T. Barua, "The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-driven Development Model in Northeast India," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2020): 101–120.

¹²⁹ M. Chand, "India's Enhanced Look East Policy takes wing," MEA Public Diplomacy Article, August 7, 2014.

¹³⁰ S. Chatterjee, *India's Spatial Imaginations of South Asia: Power, Commerce, and Community* (New Delhi: Global Oxford University Press, 2018), https://books.google.co.in/books/about/India_s_Spatial_Imaginations_of_South_As.html?id=VbmCDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y.

¹³¹ Chatterji, "Foreign Policy and federalism."

success of this policy that is much behind schedule. Doing this would enable mutually supporting structures that would sustain and spur the agenda of India's engagement with Southeast Asia on the one hand, and on the other, the development of the Northeast Region (NER) as a whole in the process.¹³² Till then, the Look/Act East policy, cannot be construed as a reliable measure of federalization of foreign policy as local stakeholders are neither a part of the process nor is their participant a necessary ingredient of the policy. It is rather a good example of how the national imagination generates local support; either absorbing them or refusing to listen to alternative local imaginations that might want the policy drivers to operate differently.¹³³

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the tendency of India's Centre-heavy federal model which is gradually leaning towards a more accommodative and inclusionary foreign policy. Through the investigation undertaken in the three case studies, the research hypothesis is shown to be validated. This federal model in India, which officially aspires to the framework of cooperative federalism, grants more democratic space to the voices of the regional states than the earlier Centre-heavy federal model would have conceded. Regional states matter much more significantly in Indian foreign policy than the original design of federalism had envisioned. This transition has gathered momentum in the post-Cold War era of coalition politics in India where the regimes at the Centre have been weak, coupled with more assertive states as stakeholders. The decline of one-party dominance and the strengthening of the marginal voices increased the trend of coalition politics in India, which only strengthened the need to assimilate a vast array of voices. With the maturing of Indian democracy over more than six decades, many of the nascent states of 1947, which required the support of a strong Centre, have been transformed into fully developed, assertive constituent units of the nation with distinct political and sociological compositions and ethnic configurations. They are strongly represented by experienced political leadership, well-trained in the languages of political bargaining and adept at claiming stakes in national politics through negotiations, agitations and if required, manipulation. Globalization and economic liberalisation have strengthened some states against the Centre, while making others vulnerable to a wide array of forces.¹³⁴ Yet, the paper points out that a theoretical tethering to navigate the pushes and pulls of domestic politics in foreign policy,

¹³² P. Basu and S. Bhowmick, "Re-envisioning Northeast for India's 'Act East,'" Observer Research Foundation, August 9, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/re-envisioning-northeast-for-indias-act-east/>.

¹³³ S.B. Pisharoty, "The Idea of India Has Not Been Embraced Yet, It Is Only Being Engaged With," April 18, 2018, <https://thewire.in/books/the-idea-of-india-has-not-been-embraced-yet-it-is-only-being-engaged-with>.

¹³⁴ Varshney, "How Has Indian Federalism," 43–63.

within the reworked federal matrix is conspicuous in its absence; a lacuna which must be mitigated with prompt and concerted academic endeavours.

The case studies have shown how the local parties and state-led governments have relentlessly bargained with the Centre to be heard in the construction of diplomatic decisions involving neighbouring countries as well as their regional interests. However, this has proved to be a double-edged sword, as the federal balance leaning towards the states often causes undesirable interruptions in foreign relations, as shown through the cases discussed. Financially weak states, for instance Assam, were often more vocal than the stronger ones, in criticizing national foreign policy; fearing further burdens, both economic and political.¹³⁵ This paper has chosen the cases of West Bengal and Assam to discuss how they have prominently, albeit controversially, figured in India-Bangladesh ties. The ascension of BJP and the resurgence of electoral unipolarity in domestic politics officially created the doctrine of cooperative federalism, with important lessons for the involvement of states in foreign policy. But by the second term of the Modi regime in 2019,¹³⁶ political examples from all corners of the country emphatically reveal that greater federalization in foreign policy is a many-layered affair; both complex and deceptive. It is not necessarily the result of a strong commitment to liberal multiculturalism in India's democracy; rather it can be seen as a ploy to accommodate the country's many diversities.

Hence, India often slides into exclusionary policies and practices due to a manifest obsession with national interest rather than taking up the concerns of political rights and legitimacy in the neighbourhood. Moreover, the centre keeps engaging the states in its interests of foreign policy; and states are often politically motivated to toe the ideological line of the Central party or develops stakes in government formation, which weakens trends towards genuine federalism. As shown in the case study of Assam, unruly states, continue to remain irritants for the Centre, which the latter tries to trump through domestic political machinations and efforts at garnering greater electoral space in the Legislative Assemblies. West Bengal serves as a test case for this, which despite finding favours with the Centre over the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh¹³⁷ ran into virulent opposition on almost all foreign policy issues, the moment the tides of state-level politics turned with a clash ensuing between the ruling TMC and the BJP at the Centre.¹³⁸ The Northeast region remains almost a bystander to its own future as the

¹³⁵ "Assam govt., AGP criticise Centre," *Business Standard*, March 3, 2015, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/assam-govt-agp-criticise-centre-115030300733_1.html.

¹³⁶ "Narendra Modi Sworn in for second term after election landslide," BBC, May 30, 2019, last modified on January 30, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48455829>.

¹³⁷ For the detailed discussion on the Land Boundary Agreement being accomplished by the West Bengal Government and the Centre in this paper, revisit page 15 and footnote 13.

¹³⁸ "Revisiting West Bengal's chequered history of political violence," *The Economic Times*, August 21, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/revisiting-west-bengals-chequered-history-of-political-violence/articleshow/85510632.cms?from=mdr>.

Centre carefully articulates its future while its local stakeholders struggle to keep their foothold in this co-option. Thus, this paper attempts to put the federal structure of India under examination, to understand the ideas and trajectories of its foreign policy while negotiating the regional states as stakeholders, especially focusing on the border states. In some cases, like the northeast, the idea of federalization of foreign policy suffers from an unmistakable unitary bias. In other cases, like West Bengal and Assam, which have mattered robustly in India's diplomatic dealings with Bangladesh, foreign policy is being tempered substantially, though not exclusively, by the domestic politics of the nation.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Udayan Das, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Saint Xavier's College, Kolkata, for his editorial support.