

Beyond the State: Non-State Actors and the Making of India's Foreign Policy (1980–2025)

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Abstract : Mainstream analyses of Indian foreign policy have long privileged the state as the primary and often exclusive actor in external affairs. Rooted in realist assumptions and reinforced by the institutional dominance of political leadership and the foreign policy bureaucracy, this reminder has marginalised the role of non-state actors (NSAs) in shaping India's international behaviour. However, since the 1980s—and with greater intensity following economic liberalisation in the 1990s—India's foreign policy environment has become increasingly permeated by non-state actors such as diasporic communities, insurgent groups, advocacy networks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and private economic actors. This paper examines how, when, and through which mechanisms non-state actors have influenced India's foreign policy between 1980 and 2025. Drawing on constructivist, liberal, and transnational approaches within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and employing a comparative case-study methodology with process tracing, the study analyses three domains of non-state influence: diaspora lobbying in India–United States relations, insurgent impact on India's Sri Lanka policy, and NGO-driven norm diffusion in multilateral diplomacy. The paper argues that non-state influence is conditional rather than absolute, becoming significant where state preferences are contested, legitimacy costs are high, or policy complexity constrains bureaucratic autonomy. By moving beyond a purely statist framework, the study contributes to FPA by conceptualising Indian foreign policy as a negotiated outcome shaped by continuous interaction between state authority and non-state agency.

INTRODUCTION

Indian foreign policy scholarship has traditionally been dominated by a state-centric analytical framework that privileges political leadership, bureaucratic elites, and strategic imperatives as the primary determinants of external behaviour. From the Nehruvian era of non-alignment to post-Cold War strategic engagement, foreign policy has been portrayed as a domain insulated from societal pressures and democratic contestation (Mohan, 2003; Raghavan, 2010). This perspective reflects a broader realist orientation within International Relations, where the state is treated as a unitary actor pursuing clearly defined national interests under conditions of anarchy.

While such approaches remain valuable for analysing India's strategic conduct, they are increasingly inadequate for capturing the complexity of contemporary foreign policy-making. Since the 1980s, India's international engagement has expanded significantly across economic, normative, and institutional dimensions. Economic liberalisation, diaspora expansion, the growth of civil society, and deeper participation in global governance institutions have created multiple channels through which non-state actors interact with foreign policy processes. These developments challenge the assumption that the Indian state exercises uncontested authority over external affairs.

This paper seeks to address a central analytical question: **How and under what conditions have non-state actors influenced India's foreign policy between 1980 and 2025?** It argues that non-state actors do not displace the state as the ultimate decision-maker, but they do shape foreign policy outcomes by influencing legitimacy, framing policy debates, constraining choices, and altering cost-benefit calculations. Their influence operates through identifiable mechanisms—such as lobbying, norm diffusion, coercive pressure, and epistemic authority—and varies across issue areas and political contexts.

By adopting a longitudinal perspective spanning four decades, this study captures both the late Cold War period and the post-liberalisation era, enabling an analysis of continuity and change in the role of non-state actors. The paper contributes to Foreign Policy Analysis in two key ways. First, it offers a mechanism-based framework for understanding non-state influence in a major non-Western state. Second, it bridges the gap between International Relations theory and India-specific empirical research, an area that remains under-theorised despite India's growing global prominence.

Literature Review: From State-Centrism to Transnational Foreign Policy Analysis

State-Centric Approaches to Indian Foreign Policy

Early scholarship on Indian foreign policy emphasised strategic autonomy, geopolitical constraint, and elite consensus. Influential works portrayed foreign policy as the product of a relatively insulated decision-making elite operating within the Ministry of External Affairs and the political executive (Mohan, 2003). This literature, informed largely by realism, viewed domestic politics and societal actors as peripheral to external behaviour.

While state-centric approaches provide important insights into India's strategic choices—particularly during periods of external crisis—they suffer from two limitations. First, they assume a unitary state, overlooking internal pluralism and contestation. Second, they underestimate the growing importance of transnational processes and non-state actors in shaping foreign policy environments.

Liberal and Domestic Politics Perspectives

Liberal approaches challenged realist orthodoxy by emphasising the role of domestic institutions, interest groups, and public opinion in foreign policy-making. Putnam's (1988) two-level game framework demonstrated that international negotiations are simultaneously constrained by domestic political processes. Applied to India, this framework helps explain how coalition politics, federal dynamics, and electoral considerations shape foreign policy choices.

However, much of the Indian literature drawing on liberal approaches treats societal actors primarily as constraints rather than as autonomous agents capable of shaping state preferences. As a result, the causal role of non-state actors remains under-specified.

Constructivism and Norm-Based Explanations

Constructivist scholarship foregrounds the role of norms, identity, and socialisation in international politics. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue that norm entrepreneurs and transnational advocacy networks can influence state behaviour by redefining standards of legitimacy and appropriateness. These insights are particularly relevant for analysing India's engagement with human rights, environmental governance, and multilateral diplomacy.

Despite their relevance, constructivist applications to Indian foreign policy remain fragmented and often anecdotal. There is limited systematic analysis of how normative pressures interact with domestic political structures in shaping policy outcomes.

Transnationalism and Non-State Actors

Transnational approaches further challenge state-centric assumptions by highlighting multiple channels of interaction across borders (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Keck and Sikkink (1998) demonstrate how advocacy networks mobilise information, symbolic politics, and moral authority to influence policy outcomes. While this literature provides a robust theoretical foundation, empirical applications to India remain limited and issue-specific.

Theoretical Framework: Mechanisms and Conditionality of Non-State Influence

This study adopts a **mechanism-based theoretical framework** that integrates insights from constructivism, liberalism, and transnationalism. Rather than asking whether non-state actors matter, it focuses on **how** they matter and **under what conditions** their influence becomes consequential.

Mechanisms of Non-State Actor Influence

Four primary mechanisms are identified:

1. **Lobbying and Electoral Leverage**

Diaspora groups influence host-country political processes, indirectly shaping India's bilateral relations by altering external constraints.

2. **Norm Diffusion and Moral Framing**

NGOs and advocacy networks shape policy debates by framing issues in normative terms and raising reputational costs.

3. **Coercive Security Externalities**

Armed non-state actors influence foreign policy by generating instability, altering threat perceptions, and constraining state choices.

4. **Epistemic Authority and Expertise**

Business actors and think tanks influence foreign policy through technical knowledge and economic credibility.

Conditionality of Influence

Non-state influence is not uniform. It is strongest where state preferences are divided, legitimacy costs are high, or policy complexity limits bureaucratic autonomy. This conditional framework guides the empirical analysis that follows.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design**, appropriate for analysing the indirect, informal, and often opaque ways in which non-state actors (NSAs) influence foreign policy. Given that NSA influence rarely manifests through formal decision-making authority, the research prioritises **causal mechanisms** and **processes** rather than variable correlation.

Research Strategy

The paper adopts a **comparative case-study approach** combined with **process tracing**. This strategy enables the identification of causal pathways linking non-state actor mobilisation to foreign policy outcomes, while also allowing for cross-case comparison. Case selection follows a purposive logic based on three criteria:

1. **Variation in actor type** (diaspora groups, insurgent organisations, advocacy networks)

2. **Variation in mechanisms of influence** (lobbying, coercion, norm diffusion)

3. **Variation in foreign policy domains** (bilateral, regional security, multilateral diplomacy)

This design allows the study to move beyond single-issue explanations and generate analytically generalisable insights within the limits of qualitative research.

Methods and Data Sources

The analysis draws on multiple sources of data to ensure triangulation:

- **Process tracing** is used to reconstruct sequences linking NSA activity to shifts in policy discourse, decision-making, or outcomes.
- **Document and discourse analysis** of parliamentary debates, official foreign policy statements, policy speeches, and media coverage is employed to identify framing strategies and normative justification.
- **Secondary literature and archival material**, including memoirs of diplomats, historical accounts, and NGO reports, supplement primary sources.

- **Elite interviews** (where available through secondary sources) with policymakers, journalists, and civil society actors are used to contextualise decision-making dynamics.

Limitations

The study acknowledges limitations related to restricted access to classified material, retrospective bias in elite accounts, and uneven data availability across cases. These limitations are mitigated through triangulation and cautious causal inference.

Case Study I: Diaspora Politics and India–United States Foreign Policy

Contextual Background

The Indian diaspora emerged as a significant political actor in the United States from the 1980s onward, driven by demographic expansion, economic mobility, and increasing political participation. By the 1990s, Indian Americans occupied influential positions in business, academia, and professional associations, creating new transnational linkages between India and the United States. Unlike traditional domestic interest groups, the diaspora does not engage directly with Indian foreign policy institutions. Instead, it operates through **host-country political systems**, indirectly shaping India's foreign relations by influencing the preferences and constraints of powerful external actors.

Mechanisms of Influence

Lobbying and Electoral Leverage

Diaspora organisations mobilised campaign donations, voter blocs, and policy advocacy to influence US lawmakers. This became particularly visible following India's 1998 nuclear tests, when diaspora groups worked to counter negative perceptions and resist punitive sanctions.

Normative Reframing

Diaspora actors reframed India as a responsible democratic state and a potential strategic partner rather than a proliferation threat. This reframing helped lower reputational barriers to engagement and facilitated policy shifts within the US Congress.

Policy Outcomes

The gradual normalisation of India–US relations culminating in the 2005 civil nuclear agreement cannot be explained solely through realist convergence of interests. Diaspora lobbying played a supportive role by reducing domestic resistance within the United States and legitimising executive action (Putnam, 1988; Cohen, 2008).

Analytical Insight

This case demonstrates that diaspora influence is **amplificatory rather than determinative**. Diaspora actors matter most when external elites are divided and when India seeks international legitimacy. Their influence reinforces favourable state preferences rather than generating policy change independently.

Case Study II: Insurgent Non-State Actors and India's Sri Lanka Policy

Background and Context

India's engagement with Sri Lanka during the 1980s and early 1990s provides a contrasting example of **coercive non-state influence**. The rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a powerful armed non-state actor transformed the regional security environment and created direct spillover effects for India.

The conflict generated refugee flows into India, intensified ethnic mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, and produced sustained domestic political pressure on the central government. These dynamics blurred the boundary between internal security and foreign policy.

Mechanisms of Influence

Security Externalities

The LTTE's insurgency altered India's threat perception by destabilising its southern maritime periphery. The risk of regional escalation and domestic unrest constrained policy choices.

Indirect Domestic Leverage

Although the LTTE did not lobby Indian policymakers directly, its actions influenced state-level politics and public opinion, thereby shaping the domestic context within which foreign policy decisions were made.

Policy Consequences

India's decision to deploy the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) reflected a reactive foreign policy shaped under coercive pressure rather than strategic design. The subsequent withdrawal of forces and recalibration of Sri Lanka policy illustrate how armed non-state actors can force policy reversals by increasing political and security costs (Lake, 2002; Kalyvas, 2006).

Analytical Insight

This case highlights an often-overlooked dimension of non-state influence: **constraint without consent**. Armed non-state actors shape foreign policy by narrowing the range of viable options rather than by persuading policymakers.

Case Study III: NGOs, Advocacy Networks, and India's Multilateral Diplomacy

Context: NGOs as Transnational Norm Entrepreneurs

Since the early 1990s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and transnational advocacy networks have become increasingly visible in shaping India's engagement with multilateral institutions and global governance regimes. Economic liberalisation, greater openness to international institutions, and India's expanding participation in United Nations bodies created new opportunities for non-state actors to influence foreign policy through **normative and discursive channels** rather than through formal authority.

Unlike diaspora groups or insurgent actors, NGOs typically do not exert influence by altering material incentives or coercive constraints. Instead, they function as **norm entrepreneurs**, seeking to redefine standards of legitimacy, appropriateness, and responsibility in international politics (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Their influence is therefore most visible in issue areas characterised by strong normative content, such as human rights, environmental protection, labour standards, and humanitarian law.

Mechanisms of Influence

Norm Diffusion and Moral Framing

NGOs mobilise information, symbolic politics, and legal discourse to frame specific policy issues as matters of international obligation rather than domestic discretion. In multilateral forums, this framing raises reputational costs for states that resist dominant global norms. Indian NGOs, often working in conjunction with transnational partners, have participated in advocacy campaigns related to child labour, environmental protection, gender rights, and indigenous communities.

Transnational Pressure and “Naming and Shaming”

By engaging international media, United Nations special rapporteurs, and treaty-monitoring bodies, advocacy networks generate external scrutiny that feeds back into India’s foreign policy calculus. Although such pressure rarely produces immediate policy change, it alters the discursive environment in which Indian diplomats must operate.

India’s State Response

India’s response to NGO influence in multilateral diplomacy has been marked by **selective engagement and strategic resistance**. On the one hand, India has sought to project itself as a responsible global actor committed to international cooperation, particularly in areas such as climate change and development. On the other hand, it has consistently emphasised sovereignty, developmental priorities, and national context to resist externally imposed normative standards.

Domestically, this ambivalence has translated into tighter regulatory frameworks governing NGO activity, reflecting the state’s concern that transnational advocacy may undermine policy autonomy. Internationally, however, Indian diplomats increasingly engage normative arguments on their own terms, seeking to reinterpret global norms in ways consistent with domestic priorities (Acharya, 2004).

Analytical Insight

This case illustrates that NGO influence operates primarily at the level of **discourse and justification** rather than direct policy outcomes. While NGOs rarely force India to alter core foreign policy positions, they reshape how those positions are articulated and defended. This confirms constructivist expectations that norms matter not by compelling compliance but by structuring the boundaries of legitimate argument.

Comparative Analysis: Patterns of Non-State Influence

A comparative analysis of the three case studies reveals several consistent patterns that refine existing theoretical debates on non-state actors and foreign policy.

First, **non-state influence is mechanism-specific**. Diaspora groups exert influence through lobbying and electoral leverage in host states; insurgent actors constrain policy through coercive security externalities; and NGOs shape outcomes through norm diffusion and reputational pressure. Treating non-state actors as a homogeneous category obscures these crucial differences.

Second, **non-state influence is conditional rather than universal**. Across cases, influence becomes most significant when state preferences are internally divided, when international legitimacy is at stake, or when issue complexity limits bureaucratic monopoly over expertise. In contrast, in areas of high strategic consensus—such as nuclear doctrine or territorial sovereignty—non-state influence remains marginal.

Third, **state agency remains central**. Far from being overwhelmed by non-state pressures, the Indian state actively manages its engagement with non-state actors. It selectively co-opts diaspora and business actors, strategically engages with normative advocacy, and suppresses or marginalises actors perceived as security threats. This finding challenges both realist assumptions of complete state autonomy and liberal claims of societal dominance.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper has argued that Indian foreign policy between 1980 and 2025 cannot be adequately understood through a purely state-centric lens. While the state remains the ultimate decision-maker, non-state actors shape foreign policy outcomes by influencing legitimacy, framing debates, constraining options, and altering cost–benefit calculations. Their influence operates through identifiable mechanisms and is conditioned by domestic political structures and international environments.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest several implications. First, Indian foreign policy institutions would benefit from **institutionalised engagement** with certain non-state actors—particularly diasporas and epistemic communities—rather than relying on ad hoc or reactive interactions. Second, a **differentiated approach** to non-state actors is essential, recognising the distinct challenges posed by coercive, normative, and cooperative actors. Third, as global governance increasingly operates through norms, India must invest in **proactive narrative-building** and norm entrepreneurship rather than defensive resistance.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to Foreign Policy Analysis in four ways. First, it advances a **mechanism-based framework** that explains how non-state actors influence foreign policy without overstating their power. Second, it demonstrates the value of integrating constructivist, liberal, and transnational insights for analysing foreign policy in emerging powers. Third, it provides a longitudinal account of non-state influence in India, highlighting how such influence evolves alongside economic and political change. Finally, it addresses a significant gap in Indian foreign policy scholarship by systematically analysing non-state agency rather than treating it as peripheral.

Future Research Directions

Several avenues for future research emerge from this analysis. First, the growing role of **digital platforms and social media** as non-state actors warrants systematic study. Second, comparative research across emerging powers could help identify whether India's experience is distinctive or representative. Third, quantitative network analysis could complement qualitative findings by mapping patterns of interaction between state and non-state actors. Finally, greater attention to **subnational actors**—such as state governments and city diplomacy—would further enrich understanding of India's foreign policy ecosystem.

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