Soft Sovereignty, Rising Powers and Subnational Foreign Policy-Making: The Case of India

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Abstract

The rise of ‘new powers’ in international politics has been frequently associated with a reemergence of traditional notions of sovereignty as a backlash against the weakening of nation-state sovereignty related to globalization. We argue that the coexistence of these trends has led to new forms of ‘soft sovereignty’. Soft sovereignty means that rising powers both gain and lose authority: From above, their freedom from interference within the international state system is strengthened due to their new status and influence. At the same time, rising powers’ governments are losing authority due to the rise of a multiplicity of sub- and transnational actors from below. We apply the concept of soft sovereignty to the analysis of foreign policy-making in India as a least-likely case of a weakening of sovereignty from within a sovereignty-oriented rising power. The analysis of India’s relations with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka reveals the huge impact that subnational governments have had on India’s policies towards its South Asian neighbors over the past years. The dynamics observed in the case of India reflect many of the traits of current globalization processes, from regionalization to identity politics to the multiplication of actors in the conduct of foreign politics.

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Introduction

The transformation of national sovereignty was at the heart of the 1990s’ theorization of globalization. Its gradual dissolution within an emerging world society was described both as a potential for a more just world order and the cause for disorder, conflict and democratic decay. Integration often symbolized the positive, fragmentation the negative outcomes of transformation processes. More recently, however, the emergence of new centres of nation-state power in the former periphery of world politics has reinstated the belief in strong nation-states as providers of regional and global order (Laïdi, 2012).

Yet, a closer look at politics of and within rising powers reveals a more nuanced picture regarding the evolving status of national sovereignty than is frequently suggested by the rhetoric of rising powers. New actors within several of these countries have gained autonomy vis-à-vis the nation-state in a range of fields. Municipalities in urbanized Brazil, for instance, considerably increased their international activities, from partaking in transnational networks to economic diplomacy, throughout the 2000s (Salomón, 2012). South African provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape in the early 2000s deviated from the national Aids policy by negotiating directly with foreign pharmaceutical companies and the Global Fund while Chinese provinces like Guanxi have promoted economic relations with neighbouring countries (Cornelissen, 2006; Cheng, 2013). Even in India, one of the most outspoken defenders of the notion of national sovereignty since the heyday of Nonalignment, a diffusion of power from the central government to local actors has taken place in recent years. In this study, we focus on the impact of subnational governments on the field of foreign policy-making, an issue area that is commonly understood as the exclusive preserve of a highly centralized elite. In fact, a centralized foreign policy conduct is regarded as a core component of ‘ideal-type’ national sovereignty and governments of most rising powers have been preoccupied with safeguarding national sovereignty against sovereignty-diffusing tendencies from within and beyond national borders. By drawing upon the Indian case, this paper aims to contribute to the much needed debate on the transformation of national sovereignty and its interplay with global power shifts toward formerly peripheral nation-states.

To this end, we first sketch recent debates in the globalization literature on the weakening of nation-state sovereignty and counter-arguments on the impact of rising powers promoting a re-emergence of traditional notions of sovereignty. We then introduce the concept of ‘soft sovereignty’, highlighting the theoretical nexus between national sovereignty and post-modern foreign policymaking with a multiplicity of actors in complex settings. In the empirical section of the paper, we discuss Indian foreign policy-making as a least-likely case of a weakening of sovereignty from within a sovereignty-oriented rising power. Subnational governments’ impact on India’s policies towards its South Asian neighbours exhibits many of the traits of current globalization processes, from regionalization to identity politics to the multiplication of actors in the conduct of foreign politics. Indeed, the federalization of foreign policy is almost certain to induce further sovereignty compromises.

Globalization and Changes in Sovereignty
Sovereignty is conventionally understood as the national government’s capability to effectively regulate activities within (domestic sovereignty) and across national borders (interdependence sovereignty). The government’s domestic authority structures are usually considered to be independent of external actors’ decisions (Westphalian sovereignty) and internationally recognized (international legal sovereignty). As such, sovereignty is under siege, globalization theory claims (Held et al., 2010). National borders have become less of an obstacle for social interactions following technological and political transformations since the height of the sovereign nation-state in the golden age of modernization, the 1950s and 60s (Hobsbawm, 1994). Meanwhile, smaller geographical units have regained prominence from California to Guangxi. At first sight, this should not be surprising: If technological and social changes like the erosion of language barriers allow for indiscriminate contact – economic or otherwise – with both compatriots and ‘foreigners’, those territorial spaces in which material closeness still matters, the locality or province (not the nation), become more important.

Following Zürn (1998, p. 264-77), societal denationalization and political fragmentation are twin processes in globalization, the former conditioning the latter. Both affect the praxis of national sovereignty. Denationalization, understood as the transfer of political decision-making powers to inter- and supranational entities, combined with economic liberalization, weakens the ability of national governments to attain their political objectives (Keating, 1999, p. 3). The empowerment of unelected bodies beyond the nation-state has undermined national legislatives’ authority, thereby underpinning the loss of national sovereignty as a direct but unintended consequence of growing interconnectedness (Sassen, 2003). At the same time, economic insecurity in the wake of liberalization has increased the demand for state protection in order to resist the destabilizing forces of globalization. In many cases, subnational administrative units and local governments have become the addressees of such discontents.

At the cultural level, the homogenization of cultural differences across nations has incentivized the cultivation of regional differences in order to satisfy a persistent communitarian desire for substantial, non-abstract political identities. In fact, convergences in values, consumer and business practices have been accompanied by a revival and re-creation of local and/or regional identities (Bayart, 2005). Meanwhile, a more substantial normative consensus appears to be in the making across states, non-state actors and the global public. Indeed, the macro view of opinion-poll research supports the claim that global interconnectedness is paralleled by a coevolution in fundamental values, such as gender equality and tolerance, across societies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). From a micro perspective, ethnological field work on the ‘globalization from below’ and the ‘juridification of protest’ observes a transformation of local political practices across hugely diverse societies toward common legal principles and normative expectations of the governed to the governing. The celebration of uniqueness and the standardization of practices go hand in hand (Meyer, 2000: 245). Accordingly, Beck and Levy argue that we are facing a ‘crisis of territoriality’ meaning a dynamic process of cosmopolitanization which recalibrates nationhood profoundly in the face of the ‘absence of a commanding national narrative of the future’ (2013, p. 6). In this absence, subnational identities regain importance fuelling processes of political fragmentation (Sassen, 2005). Subnational actors challenging central governments in policy-making become a residue of the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992).

Overall, therefore, globalization theories consider political fragmentation, with its empowerment of unelected intergovernmental bodies and of subnational actors, to have a substantial impact on the
nation-state as the main unit in which politics is made. This weakening of the state as the main point of reference entails a weakening of national sovereignty, as it has traditionally been conceived, from both ‘above’ and ‘below’. From above, globalization implies a limitation to both Westphalian sovereignty, that is autonomy from external interferences, and international legal sovereignty as a consequence of membership in inter- and supranational regimes.

We focus, instead, on limitations to sovereignty ‘from below’ and we argue that processes of political fragmentation lead to a more subtle weakening of traditional sovereignty than that described by the notion of ‘domestic sovereignty’. According to Krasner, domestic sovereignty is about the ability of state structures to effectively exercise control within the state (1999, p. 11-2). Limitations to this type of sovereignty are usually related to open challenges to the state like those emerging from the activities of rebel groups or, more generally, from conditions of ‘limited statehood’ (Risse, 2013). We argue that – in states that do not display the characteristics of state failure commonly attributed to the demise of domestic sovereignty – political fragmentation including the growing role of subnational governments in policy-making lead to new forms of ‘soft sovereignty’ (Plagemann, in press). In democratic rising powers in particular, this entails a weakening of the central executive organs in the state and a diffusion of power to a range of subnational actors. Thereby, soft sovereignty acts as a catalyst for transnational grievances such as ethnic solidarity, environmental or economic concerns transgressing national boundaries in a given region, and further undermines interdependence and possibly even international legal and Westphalian sovereignty. As Krasner admits, the one point in which the ‘organization of domestic authority could affect international legal sovereignty occurs in the case of confederations in which the individual units of the state have some ability to conduct external relations’ (1999, p. 11). Although most current federal systems – including India – do not envisage any role in foreign policy for their member states, these have de facto become prominent players during the past decade. Hence, it is less on legal grounds than in practical terms that subnational governments become involved in foreign policy. While, as we will see below, soft sovereignty does not necessarily imply a ‘weak’ state, it leads – overall – to a limitation of sovereignty across different dimensions. In fact, the bundle of sovereignties – from domestic to Westphalian – is continuously evolving (Solingen, 2013). Because they affect each other, the erosion of one form of sovereignty undermines the others, albeit to differing degrees. While political fragmentation affects countries across the globe, its repercussions in rising powers are particularly interesting as they expose the paradoxes of sovereignty in the age of globalization and multipolarity: Central authority is weakening vis-à-vis domestic and transnational forces at the same time as it is growing stronger vis-à-vis the international state system.

The Resurgence of Sovereignty?

The narrative of globalization as a diffusion of sovereignty to both supranational bodies and subnational actors has recently been called into question. Over the past decade, rising powers like China, India, Brazil, or South Africa have increasingly challenged the traditional dominance of the ‘West’ (or ‘North’) through existing bodies like the G20, or by creating new alternative forums like BRICS. Several of these countries have a historically evolved understanding of sovereignty as national autonomy and centralized control over foreign policy. Correspondingly, their government representatives have emphasized the principle of sovereignty and of a ‘strong state’ as guiding notions in global politics. Recent comparative research on the BRICS countries’ development
strategies underlined their nation state-centric character (Nölke & Claar, 2013). Brazilian President ‘Lula’ da Silva, for instance, prominently argued for a return to an understanding of national sovereignty ‘without adjectives’ thereby refuting his predecessor’s rhetorical experiments with the concept of shared sovereignty, or sobrania compartilhada (Saraiva, 2010). The staunch opposition of rising powers to binding agreements in the field of climate policy and the abstention by China, Russia, India and Brazil on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on intervention in Libya in 2011 are just two of the most glaring examples of this trend. Against this background, Laidi describes both democratic and autocratic members of BRICS as a ‘coalition of sovereign state defenders’ merely united by the desire to ‘erode western hegemonic claims by protecting the principle which these claims are deemed to most threaten, namely the political sovereignty of states’ (2012, p. 615). In an article published in Foreign Affairs, former Mexican Foreign Minister, Jorge G. Castañeda warned that ‘[…] granting emerging economic powers a greater role on the world stage would probably weaken the trend toward a stronger multilateral system and an international legal regime that upholds democracy, human rights, nuclear non-proliferation, and environmental protection’ (2010, p. 117).

Besides their emphasis on Westphalian sovereignty, rising powers have also called for limitations to those forces potentially impinging upon domestic sovereignty, as illustrated by China’s efforts to protect ‘every bit of domestic sovereignty from centrifugal tendencies (Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang)’ (Solingen, 2013, p. 113, emphasis removed). The Russian polity has undergone an even more profound process of recentralization throughout the past decade depriving its provinces of most of their former autonomy in the name of strengthening (national) state power and sovereignty (Sharafutdinova, 2013). In sum, much political commentary, official BRICS rhetoric – if not action – as well as (some) political science research suggests that the nascent multipolarity effectively reinstated a neo-Westphalian world order – rather than calling into question national sovereignty in the name of human rights or the combat against global externalities from climate change to terrorism.

However, we argue that these efforts and discourses on national sovereignty hardly imply a substantial return to traditional principles of sovereignty on the ground, since these countries are themselves deeply affected by tendencies that make them shift towards forms of soft sovereignty. As most other countries, rising powers have to deal with multilateral institutions, supra-national regimes or processes of legal transnationalization – even though, as Randeria has shown for the case of India, they are ‘in a position to negotiate the terms on which they share sovereignty in certain fields of policy-making while retaining control over others’ (2007, p. 6). If we take into consideration the often overlooked challenges to sovereignty from below, first empirical evidence suggests that also strong (or ‘cunning’, in Randeria’s terms) states are increasingly faced with limitations to the authority of the central government – regardless of regime type. Hence, being cunning empowers rising powers’ centres vis-à-vis traditional great powers and international institutions, but not necessarily vis-à-vis subnational governments: Nation-states are becoming more and more disaggregated (Slaughter, 2004), and this trend does not spare rising powers. What we therefore need is a more nuanced view of rising powers’ sovereignty.

**Foreign Policy Making and Soft Sovereignty**

Globalization has made its inroads into different policy areas to different degrees. While most states – including rising powers – are ready to accept limitations to their sovereignty by delegating
competencies to international bodies in regulatory areas like trade policy, they are much more reluctant on distributive issues like climate policy, and are usually highly uncompromising when it comes to the field of foreign and security policy. As the paper-tiger character of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) shows, the field of foreign policy is the one in which even the most integrated international organizations fail. And even in the most democratic and participatory countries, the ‘primacy of foreign policy’ has led to a stronger centralization and to limitations to public scrutiny in foreign policy-making in comparison to other policy fields (Carlsnaes, 2002, p. 332). Foreign and security policy therefore best represent the hard core of nation-state power.

If we focus on the actors involved in foreign policy making, under conditions of traditional, ‘ideal-type’ sovereignty, this would be the domain of the foreign policy executive, that is government elites, primarily the foreign ministry and the prime minister or president (Lobell, 2009). In many cases, foreign ministries and their diplomatic apparatuses have become the symbol and sole articulator of the principle of unconditional sovereignty itself, cultivating their autonomy from external influences. While the decision making process would always be the result of bargaining among domestic political players (Allison, 1971), the input of subnational actors not belonging to the executive would be limited. Yet, the farther away actual policy-making is from these ‘ideal-typical’ conditions, the more blurry becomes the boundary between international and domestic politics (Lobell, 2009). In fact, a broadening spectrum of actors involved in foreign policy-making is a megatrend in global politics affecting the foreign policy of established and rising powers alike (Schirm, 2013). Among those actors are line ministries, business associations, media, NGOs and subnational governments. The latters’ participation in foreign policy-making leads to shifts in terms of foreign policy content since subnational governments are less concerned with great power considerations and more likely to articulate specific local, and often transnational, grievances. This might also contribute to weaken the emphasis placed on the defence of national sovereignty and, in turn, reinforce all traits of globalization processes. If one considers sovereignty as the ability of the nation-state to effectively regulate the activities taking place within and across national borders (domestic and interdependence sovereignty), then strong traditional sovereignty will be undermined by the transnational activities of subnational governments – the result of which we term soft sovereignty.

Soft sovereignty, however, is not to be misunderstood as a recourse to the ‘soft state’ concept, as modelled in comparative politics (Hyden, 2006, p. 68). In rising powers in particular, decentralization reforms resulted in both, a stronger local and national level of government. Consecutive central governments in Brazil, for instance, proved to be very capable in transferring authority downwards from the state level to the municipal level while simultaneously increasing oversight functions and financial control of the national bureaucracy throughout the late 1990s and 2000s (Rich & Gómez, 2012). Comparable processes occurred in South Africa and India (Plagemann, in press). Hence, the federalization of foreign policy is ambiguous as it does not preclude centralizing tendencies altogether. National governments have also gained some authority internally via the consolidation of state capacities in the wake of economic growth. In international negotiations and multilateral institutions, rising powers such as India and Brazil have become important actors, often with the power to veto propositions from Northern states. At the same time, forces from below have both weakened the centre’s domestic sovereignty and imposed new political objectives on the foreign policy executive. Typically, the latter do not include rising powers’ characteristic prioritization of safeguarding national sovereignty. As Keating puts it, ‘[n]ew forms of nationalism have emerged, less tied to the construction of a state in the classic sense, and more concerned with building a capacity
for collective action, in government and civil society, in the face of the global market’ (2000, p. 2). Often, new actors within the state forge alliances amongst themselves as well as with organs at the centre in order to gain political clout. Subnational governments, civil society organization and business are likely to articulate political issues with a transnational character such as ethnic solidarity, trade, resource management or infrastructure, all of which – by definition – relate directly to globalization as a dual process of integration and fragmentation (Rosenau, 1997). The more salient such transnational matters are, the more profound the erosion of national sovereignty via subnational actors’ involvement in foreign policy. As a consequence, we observe the recalibration of sovereignty, not simply domestic politics processes.

Soft sovereignty captures the ambiguity resulting from the novel empowerment of subnational actors, which makes the concept particularly suitable for the analysis of rising powers. Subnationally, soft sovereignty allows for the expression of difference through autonomous normative orders and the possession of multiple, but not necessarily hierarchically ordered, political identities within varying political units – from traditional communities to municipalities, and subnational states. The centre certainly occupies a preeminent position within this ‘transnational space with a multiplicity of actors’ (Bava, 2010, p. 114). Hence, soft sovereignty does not imply the dissolution of the nation state, as has been suggested by globalization theory; instead it allows for retaining crucial parts of Westphalian and international legal sovereignty both on the regional and global level. However, in often unintended consequences of intended actions, the centre is forced to make compromises that deviate from strictly centralized foreign policy-making. As a result, under conditions of soft sovereignty, governments of rising powers combine a sovereigntist foreign policy rhetoric with the incapacity to realize it in a range of areas, due to subnational pressures.

Soft Sovereignty in Indian Foreign Policy-Making

To corroborate our claim that the re-emergence of strong Westphalian states in a multipolar world order is a rather implausible scenario and that even the most outspoken promoters of national sovereignty are struggling with a shift to soft sovereignty, we discuss changes in foreign policy-making in India as a least likely crucial case (Gerring, 2007). We consider this to be a least likely case for two reasons: because of the above-mentioned special character of foreign policy as the hard core of state power, which has traditionally been shielded from subnational and societal influences; and because India is, among the BRICS countries, the one that has perhaps most consistently emphasized the principle of sovereignty since independence. As Fidler and Ganguly put it, ‘[s]overeignty, no matter how badly exercised, was the lifeblood of post imperial political, economic, and cultural independence for the peoples of India’ (2010, p. 151).

Since Nehru, the field of foreign policy has been a domain on which the central government has kept an extremely tight control. The Constitution provides for the central government having ‘virtually exclusive’ jurisdiction over foreign and security policy (Mattoo & Jacob, 2009, p. 174). Moreover, the government’s order of business provides for all ministries to delegate any matter involving foreign relations to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and subnational bureaucrats are not allowed to interact with multilateral or bilateral institutions without the approval of the centre (ibid.). The introduction of the figure of the National Security Advisor, who reports to the Prime Minister, further strengthened this trend in the late 1990s. Only recently, things have started to change with first
indications of an involvement of the business community in foreign economic policy making, as in the case of track 2 initiatives by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) that promoted the rapprochement between India and the United States (Malik & Medcalf, 2011). Civil society, by contrast, still has a limited impact on foreign policy-making, and public debates mostly remain confined to small circles of experts (Hall, 2013). Yet, we argue that in recent years a trend has emerged that has explicitly challenged the centralized tradition of foreign policy-making: the growing role of single states in the Indian federation through the dynamics of coalition politics.

**Indian Union States and Foreign Policy-Making**

Since the early 1990s we observe an unprecedented strengthening of states within the Indian Union and a broadening of their political room to manoeuvre closely related to the processes of denationalization and fragmentation, which accompanied India’s entry into the globalizing world. The regionalization of party politics soon led to a ‘federalization of national politics’ (Mitra, 2011, p. 102) with political parties from single states playing a central role in parliamentary elections as coalition partners for the two main established nation-wide parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In turn, participation in the central government and the corresponding opportunities to reward local supporters boosted the local popularity of regional parties. Growing economic inequalities and uncertainties related to the economic transition further made regional parties appear a viable alternative for the provision of safety in a hostile world. Indeed, among the chief causes for individuals’ preference for regional rather than national political parties in India is the understanding that the former are capable of representing their interests more effectively than the latter. In any case, as argued by globalization theories, the political fragmentation that came with regionalization reflects an undercurrent of Indian social changes: the weakening of nationalism as a cohesive force in society and politics (Deshpande, 2011). Through their participation in national coalition governments, regional parties have gained enormous leverage on the central government. As a result, subnational grievances on foreign and security policies and regional interdependencies are being articulated at the centre to an extent unseen. This new dynamic is most pertinent in South Asia where economic interdependencies and historical linkages are strongest (Mattoo & Jacob, 2009, pp. 183-5). Examples include the role of parties from West Bengal in relations with Bangladesh, and of parties from Tamil Nadu in relations with Sri Lanka, two cases we will analyse in greater detail.

Besides these extreme cases, Indian states have started to pursue a whole range of less visible activities. Their growing international role has been increasingly acknowledged, as demonstrated by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to West Bengal in May 2012. International financial institutions, the UNDP, UNICEF and the Asian Development Bank have all maintained direct negotiations with single states since the 1990s, and state governments have become increasingly involved in India’s WTO negotiating position. They also frequently negotiate directly with large foreign businesses to attract FDI (Jenkins, 2003) and some set up ‘smart cities’ in order to attract foreign investment in the high-tech sector. Moreover, states like Punjab, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur have continuously lobbied the Union government to strengthen trade relations and improve infrastructure with their respective neighbours Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Maini, 2012). While most initiatives have been in line with the centrally held economic vision, they were approved by the Union government primarily due to coalition pressures and against a good deal of hesitancy, particularly by the MEA’s bureaucracy.
West Bengal’s Influence on Relations with Bangladesh

The Indian state of West Bengal has always been affected by developments on its eastern border, in what was East Pakistan until 1971 and currently is Bangladesh. The population on both sides of the border shares a common language and culture and the porousness of the border has favoured transnational influences and security externalities. Migration flows from Bangladesh to India, legal and illegal cross-border trade, the transnational activities of rebel groups, the pending settlement of sections of the border and the sharing of rivers – a vital issue for Bangladesh as a lower-riparian country – have affected bilateral relations over the past decades. The extreme power asymmetry between the two countries, reinforced by the India-locked geopolitical position of Bangladesh, its huge trade deficit and its latent fear of being assimilated by India, further strained the two countries’ ties. Unsurprisingly, relations with India have been one of the most contested topics in the heated political debates in Bangladesh, dominated by the rivalry between the Awami League (AL), which is generally considered to be more India-friendly, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which has maintained rather tense relations with India. On the Indian side, the central government had aimed to improve relations with South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, since the 1990s and has undertaken actual steps to do so since the 2000s. The driving force of these efforts has been the objective of having a peaceful periphery and of limiting spill-over effects potentially able to activate destabilizing forces within India itself (Destradi, 2012a, p. 60). To achieve these goals, the Indian government has pursued a typically functionalist approach privileging economic interdependence and improved ‘connectivity’. In the case of Bangladesh, the end of the BNP-led government in 2006 provided India with a unique window of opportunity to start a rapprochement. In a major shift from its traditional protectionist position, in 2007 New Delhi announced that it would provide non-reciprocal duty-free access to its market for products from the region’s least developed countries – a provision that explicitly benefited Bangladesh. Moreover, initiatives to improve bilateral ties with Dhaka included the reduction of non-tariff barriers to trade and the lift of the ban on FDI from Bangladesh (ibid., p. 148). The AL government that came to power in Bangladesh in 2008, on its part, reacted to these unprecedented concessions with a previously similarly unthinkable readiness to cooperate with New Delhi: Several members of Indian rebel groups operating from the territory of Bangladesh were arrested, and a flurry of bilateral exchanges took place between 2008 and 2011. However, this remarkable process of rapprochement was seriously undermined by domestic actors from the Indian state of West Bengal. In September 2011, a visit to Dhaka by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was planned, during which he was scheduled to sign a range of agreements with his Bangladeshi counterpart, Sheikh Hasina. Among them was an agreement on the sharing of the waters of the river Teesta, which flows through West Bengal and into Bangladesh. It would have provided for a 50-50 division of water, as compared to the de facto 75-25 division in favour of upper-riparian West Bengal, and therefore represented a major concession by India, and was understood in Bangladesh as the centrepiece of Manmohan Singh’s visit (Times of India, 2011). In return, Dhaka had planned to allow the transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh to India’s north-eastern states – something New Delhi had requested for decades and which would have constituted a major achievement for the Indian government. In the last minute, however, West Bengal’s chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, who should have accompanied Manmohan Singh to Dhaka, cancelled her participation citing unfair provisions of the water-sharing deal, which would harm farmers in northern Bengal, and the lack of consultation on the part of New Delhi (The Telegraph, 2012).
Unable to convince Mamata Banerjee to accept the deal and to forcefully assert the executive’s constitutional prerogative in the field of foreign-policy making, Manmohan Singh bent to the will of West Bengal’s chief minister. Her All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) was a member of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and, with its 19 MPs, was in a powerful position to make its voice heard in relations with the central government, which had already been weakened by the withdrawal of several alliance partners. Additional pressure on the central government came from the West Bengal unit of the Congress party, which reportedly supported Mamata’s request (Jha, 2011). As a consequence, the Indian central government had to compromise on its efforts at improving relations with Bangladesh. This was not only embarrassing for New Delhi, but also marked a serious blow to one of the cornerstones of India’s efforts in improving relations with its South Asian neighbours.

The case of the water-sharing agreement with Bangladesh therefore shows the vulnerability of the Indian foreign policy executive to the demands of single Union states against the background of coalition politics as a case of soft sovereignty in an otherwise highly sovereigntist rising power. Locally-generated transnational grievances were voiced by the West Bengal state government, and the dynamics of coalition politics forced the central government to concede. Ultimately, soft sovereignty undermined the central government’s ability to pursue its policy of rapprochement with Dhaka.

Tamil Nadu’s Influence on Relations with Sri Lanka

The growing impact of Union states on India’s foreign-policy making has become even more evident in India’s relations with Sri Lanka. As in the prior case, the population of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu has a high degree of cultural affinity to the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. Moreover, it has long been affected by events taking place on the island, especially in relation to the civil war that saw the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighting for the establishment of a Tamil state in the north-east of Sri Lanka. The war ended in May 2009 with the military defeat and physical elimination of the LTTE, after a military offensive by the government that was tainted with war crimes and massive human rights violations.

Large sections of the population in Tamil Nadu have long been sympathetic towards the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka, making the civil war a heated object of contention and a tool in the political rivalry between the two main regional parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). After the disastrous failure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) mission to Sri Lanka in 1990 and the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE in 1991, the Indian central government did not allow Tamil Nadu parties to hijack its hands-off policy on Sri Lanka. Fearing to lose its influence on Sri Lanka to an increasingly present China, New Delhi from 2007 onwards even tacitly supported the Sri Lankan government’s military campaign against the LTTE (Destradi, 2012b). At a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) held immediately after the end of the war on 28 May 2009, New Delhi supported the Sri Lankan government by voting against a motion requesting an investigation of war crimes. While the brutal way the Sri Lankan army terminated the war had provoked outrage among the population of Tamil Nadu, at this time the DMK-led state government was unable to exercise pressure on New Delhi due to state-level coalition dynamics. In fact, the DMK could not
alienate the Congress, which supported the DMK’s minority state government (ibid., pp. 609-11). New Delhi was therefore able to push through its own line, driven by the desire to woo the Rajapaksa regime of Sri Lanka as an important partner in India’s regional backyard.

When the investigation of war crimes returned to the UNHRC agenda in March 2012, however, things changed. This time, New Delhi voted in favour of a U.S.-promoted resolution, which requested the Sri Lankan government ‘to fulfill its relevant legal obligations and commitment to initiate credible and independent actions to ensure justice, equity, accountability and reconciliation for all Sri Lankans’ (UN, 2012). This Indian vote was a significant departure from its traditional, sovereignty-oriented rejection of any kind of meddling in the internal affairs of third countries and of ‘country-specific’ resolutions (Bagchi, 2013). This time, soft sovereignty came into play more clearly since Tamil Nadu politicians played a major role in this shift. In fact, the DMK, which now was in the opposition in Tamil Nadu and therefore was not bound by state-level coalitions, had made use of its leverage on the UPA central government by threatening to withdraw its ministers (Srinivasan, 2013).

The pressure on New Delhi further grew in March 2013, when a sharper resolution on Sri Lanka was proposed by the U.S. in the UNHRC. Again, parties from Tamil Nadu responded actively. Before the session, the DMK took to the streets to force the UPA not only to vote for the resolution, but even to introduce a resolution in parliament that would accuse Colombo of ‘genocide’ (The Hindu, 2013), and ultimately pulled out of the UPA coalition to add further weight to its demand. The central government bent to the pressure from Tamil Nadu to the extent that it summoned its UNHRC representative in the last minute with instructions to toughen the resolution (Schaffer & Schaffer, 2013). While this was impossible, India ultimately voted in favour of the resolution – compromising, again, its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of third countries.

After this episode, Tamil Nadu politicians further undermined the centre’s policies of cooperation with Sri Lanka by forcing it to shift the training of members of the Sri Lankan air force away from the soil of Tamil Nadu and by prohibiting Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa’s visits to India to be acknowledged as official visits (Srinivasan, 2013). The whole process reached its apex in November 2013, when pressure from Tamil Nadu prevented Prime Minister Manmohan Singh from taking part in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in a sign of protest against Sri Lanka’s unwillingness to investigate war crimes. Most observers agree that this move will substantially jeopardize India’s leverage on the Sri Lankan government, undermining its efforts towards a consolidation of its influence on South Asian countries.11

Also in the case of Tamil Nadu’s influence on New Delhi’s policy towards Sri Lanka we observe the dynamics of soft sovereignty. Transnational grievances related to the ethnic affinity between the populations of Tamil Nadu and the Northeast of Sri Lanka, spurred by the dramatic events of 2009, were championed by political actors at the state level. While these grievances were used as an instrument in the political competition among local parties in Tamil Nadu, their political articulation and the dependence of the central government coalition on those parties contributed to undermining New Delhi’s policies towards Sri Lanka. More precisely, New Delhi compromised its long-held principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of foreign countries as a consequence of the empowerment of subnational actors in foreign policy. India’s new approach on human rights and war crimes can be welcomed on normative grounds. However, this instance of soft sovereignty has broader implications on Indian foreign policy in South Asia and, by extension, on other forms of sovereignty. In fact, cooperation with the Sri Lankan government is a vital issue for New Delhi, which
aims to limit the growing Chinese (and Pakistani) influence in the strategically important island nation. By alienating the Sri Lankan regime, New Delhi has compromised its influence on its regional neighbourhood – something that arguably has implications also for interdependence sovereignty.

**Conclusion: Fragmentation, Foreign Policy and the Transformation of Rising Powers’ Sovereignty**

Ideal-type sovereignty of the nation-state as the effective, autonomous and exclusive regulatory agency never existed (Krasner, 1999). Great powers in particular have always – openly or not – claimed the right to interfere with less powerful nations’ sovereignty. The characteristic insistence on the principle of uncompromised national sovereignty and non-intervention professed by rising powers and developing countries alike is a consequence of these historic violations and of the ‘hypocrisy’ in dealing with sovereignty. India, like other rising powers – Brazil and China in particular – has a history of understanding national sovereignty as autonomy or self-reliance. Sovereignty-compromising tendencies, hence, are met with particular scepticism by India’s foreign policy establishment, making it a least-likely case for research into the transformation of sovereignty.

Subnational actors have been strengthened in India due to the ‘exclusivist approach by the government’ and its unresponsiveness to local demands, attributed both to contingent failures of governing alliances and to perceptions of the ineffectiveness of central governments per se. This has strengthened, in turn, the desire of subnational actors to impact foreign policy directly without resorting to a distant and elitist national centre. Meanwhile, regional political identities and the success of regional parties have increased the latter’s self-confidence vis-à-vis the centre to actually do so. In diverse societies such as India, state governments have become important transmitters of societal interests shaping foreign policy decisions – often against the will of the centre. In this sense structural changes in subnational politics (regionaization) have contributed to the articulation of transnational issues – the use of water in the case of West Bengal and ethnic solidarity in Tamil Nadu – on the national level, thereby relativizing national sovereignty. This goes beyond matters of domestic politics in a federal country. By self-confidently developing their own foreign policy priorities in a regionalizing party system, subnational governments successfully competed with the centre’s traditional foreign policy monopoly and thereby contributed to the recalibration of sovereignty. While the absolute majority of the BJP after the 2014 elections will free the government from its dependence on regional coalition partners, the influence of subnational actors on foreign policy is unlikely to be completely reverted (Ramachandran, 2014). India’s development under a potentially stronger central government will, indeed, be an interesting further test case to assess the impact of soft sovereignty in the longer run.

India’s evolving regional relations, including the incorporation of new actors in policy-making, resonances with both approaches to globalization, the 1990s optimistic theorizing on the post-Westphalian state in an emerging global society and the fear of fragmentation as a catalyst for conflict and instability: In those cases where states promote economic cooperation with India’s neighbours, subnational regionalization corresponds with India’s broader foreign policy goal of developing more benign relations in South Asia. Our analysis, on the contrary, focused on those more extreme cases in which the policies of the centre are explicitly called into question by sub-national actors. In the case of Tamil Nadu, the softening of sovereignty contributed to a debate on the protection of a co-ethnic minority in a neighbouring country, but at the same time it forced the
central government to sacrifice its – centrally defined – national interest in relations with a strategically important neighbour. In the case of West Bengal, it affected not only the centre’s agenda of rapprochement with South Asian neighbours; it also undermined its domestic interest in improving development and in pacifying the peripheral North East by strengthening ties with Bangladesh and negotiating concessions on transit from Dhaka.

In any case, the hitherto sacrosanct foreign policy monopoly of an exclusive and highly centralized elite is eroding. As in other rising powers, this is not only due to the rise of regional parties. Instead, line ministries, business and – in some cases – civil society further challenge and complement centralized foreign policy-making. The relative decline of foreign ministries as the central institutions in foreign policy-making can be read as the gradual and on-going transformation from foreign politics to ‘world domestic politics’ (Habermas, 2011). Crucially, the federalization of foreign policy in India, and the similar progress of soft sovereignty in other rising powers, is almost certain to induce further sovereignty compromises as it signals the dilution of national borders relative to internal (state) borders and blurs the distinction between domestic and foreign policy: Subnational actors become catalysts for transnational issues, even more so in post-colonial states with their arbitrarily driven borders. As externalities, from ethnic solidarity to environmental issues, weigh heavier on the regional than the global level, the effects of the federalization of foreign policy are mostly felt in relations with neighbouring countries. Brazilian states and cities, for instance, cooperate within Mercocidades, a body that unites cities and municipalities from Mercosur members in South America’s southern cone. South Africa’s provinces and municipalities bordering Swaziland and Mozambique have been very active within specific regional integration initiatives such as the Maputo Development Corridor or the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (Zondi, 2012, p. 50). On the global level, this process of inclusion of subnational actors has not proceeded at a comparable pace and, correspondingly, the historical emphasis of autonomy over interdependence is largely upheld both rhetorically and in practice. Yet, examples such as Saudi-Indo relations with regard to working conditions of migrants from the state of Kerala (Malik and Medcalf, 2011, p. 4) or the Brazilian adherence to demands by subnational governments from the Amazon region in support of a new global instrument to protect forests (REDD+) (Kleiman, 2012, p. 317-318) suggest that the difference is only one of degree, not in kind. In contrast, authoritarian rising powers, China for instance, appear to be somewhat less affected by globalization as fragmentation than democratic ones, due to stronger central control. Nevertheless, growing inequalities across its provinces and the prevalence of local protest in its multiethnic society worries policy makers in Beijing and suggests that China is not going to be spared from fragmenting tendencies (Mertha, 2009). Hence, having more power on the international scene – rising power status – in the case of India does not necessarily increase national sovereignty. Instead, rising powers are – willingly and unwillingly – subject of the very fragmenting tendencies global transformations entail. Subnational governments’ foreign policy engagement and its effects on national sovereignty are only insufficiently captured by Krasner’s terminology: Soft sovereignty in rising powers neither means partaking in the ‘post-modern world’ of EU-style shared sovereignty nor does it imply becoming a failed state of the ‘pre-modern world’ (Krasner, 2010, p. 100). Instead, sub-national actors call the centre’s authority into question, thereby touching upon domestic sovereignty. Yet, they express grievances that frequently have transnational origins, thereby also contributing to the erosion of interdependence sovereignty. Through their political power to pressure the centre, state governments even informally question the centre’s international legal sovereignty. Only rising powers’ Westphalian sovereignty remains untouched. Perhaps as a reaction, central governments put additional emphasis on the notion of sovereignty in
international affairs, thereby combining a sovereigntist foreign policy rhetoric with the incapacity to stop the (multi-facetted) erosion of their exclusive authority over territory and people. For better or worse, Indian foreign policy illustrates that the debate on the adequate model for statehood in the 21st century certainly is not over yet.

1 We thank Joachim Betz for helpful comments on the manuscript.
3 On the focus of safeguarding sovereignty in the Brazilian foreign ministry see Burges (2013). For India see Narang and Staniland (2012). For Russia and China see Baev (2012) and Gill (2007, pp. 104-14) respectively. South Africa with its history of cosmopolitan idealism in foreign policy is a differing case (Nel, 2006).
4 At the same time, rising powers’ attitude towards the responsibility to protect was much more nuanced than it is commonly assumed (Stünkel, 2014, p. 12): BRICS countries not only endorsed the concept at the 2005 World Summit but also collectively voted in favour of UNSC resolutions on conflicts in the Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau, Sudan and Côte d’Ivoire in 2011.
5 It is precisely this ability that distinguishes them from ‘weak states’.
6 India certainly is the most sovereigntist democratic rising power.
7 While a recent study reveals that Nehru might not have had such a strict view on sovereignty as is usually assumed, in his actual policies he clearly privileged the creation of a centralized sovereign state. See Bhagavan (2010) and Rudolph and Rudolph (2010), respectively.
8 Among the primary sources employed in the analysis are local newspapers from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu and expert interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 in India.
9 This came as a surprise to the central government, since Manmohan Singh had reportedly previously consulted Banerjee, who had been ‘very accommodative’ on the agreement (Jha, 2011).
10 Interviews with Indian experts, November 2013 (New Delhi).
11 Interview with Indian scholar, 27 November 2013, Indian Council of World Affairs (New Delhi).

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