



Coalition Governance In Manipur: Domestic Politics And Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Manipur occupies a paradoxical position within India's federal and foreign policy architecture. While geographically peripheral, the state is strategically central to India's eastern frontier and its engagement with Southeast Asia. This article examines how coalition governance in Manipur shapes domestic political stability and, in turn, influences foreign policy implementation at the subnational level. Drawing on literature from coalition politics, federalism, and foreign policy analysis, the article argues that coalition governments in Manipur operate as mediating structures between the Indian state and its external environment, particularly in the context of India–Myanmar relations. Coalition instability, ethnic fragmentation, and centre–state bargaining dynamics affect border management, security cooperation, and connectivity initiatives, thereby producing indirect yet consequential foreign policy outcomes. By situating Manipur within a multi-level foreign policy framework, the article challenges centralised views of Indian foreign policy and demonstrates how subnational political configurations condition the effectiveness and credibility of external engagements. The study contributes to debates on subnational actors in foreign policy and advances a more granular understanding of India's eastern diplomacy.

Keywords: Coalition governance; Manipur; Domestic politics; Foreign policy implementation; Border states; Centre–state relations.

Introduction

Indian foreign policy analysis has traditionally privileged the central state, treating subnational units as passive recipients of externally formulated strategies. This centralised analytical orientation obscures the political realities of India's border regions, where domestic governance structures frequently shape how foreign policy is implemented, experienced, and contested. Manipur, a geopolitically sensitive state bordering Myanmar, exemplifies this disconnect. Despite its strategic relevance to India's eastern frontier and its proximity to Southeast Asia, Manipur's internal political dynamics—particularly coalition governance—remain marginal to mainstream foreign policy scholarship.

Since the 1990s, coalition governance has become a defining feature of Indian politics, extending from the national level to several states characterised by fragmented party systems and social heterogeneity (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009). In Manipur, coalition governments have emerged not as transitional arrangements but as enduring political formations shaped by ethnic pluralism, regional party politics, and sustained centre-state negotiations. These domestic configurations carry significant implications for governance capacity, policy coherence, and political stability—factors that intersect directly with foreign policy concerns in a border state.

This article addresses two interrelated questions: how has coalition governance shaped domestic political outcomes in Manipur, and in what ways do these outcomes influence India's foreign policy implementation along its eastern frontier? It argues that coalition governance functions as a critical mediating variable linking domestic politics and foreign policy outcomes by shaping border security, cross-border connectivity, and diplomatic credibility vis-à-vis Myanmar. By foregrounding Manipur as a subnational site of foreign policy practice, the article contributes to broader debates on multi-level foreign policy and federal dynamics in international relations.

Coalition Governance in Indian State Politics: Conceptual Perspectives

Coalition governance refers to institutional arrangements in which executive authority is exercised jointly by multiple political parties, typically in contexts where no single party commands a legislative majority. In India, coalition politics has been theorised most extensively at the national level, particularly in relation to cabinet stability, policy bargaining, and the management of federal diversity (Chhibber & Murali, 2006). These studies conceptualise coalitions as adaptive responses to electoral fragmentation and social heterogeneity. However, insights derived from national-level analyses only partially translate to the state level, where political incentives, institutional constraints, and governance capacities vary considerably.

At the subnational level, coalition governance operates within narrower fiscal margins, weaker bureaucratic capacity, and more immediate pressures from local political mobilisation. Coalition theory emphasises coordination challenges inherent in multi-party executives, as policy outcomes must accommodate coalition partners whose support is essential for regime survival (Riker, 1962). This frequently results in minimum-winning coalitions prioritising office-holding over programmatic coherence. In state politics, where

administrative discretion is limited and policy implementation depends heavily on central transfers, these coordination challenges are amplified rather than mitigated.

States characterised by ethnic, linguistic, or regional segmentation face particularly acute problems of policy coherence. In such contexts, coalition governments often function as instruments of political accommodation, enabling representation of diverse social groups within formal institutions (Horowitz, 1985). While this inclusiveness can enhance regime legitimacy, it also generates governance fragility as coalition partners mobilise around sectional interests resistant to integration into a unified policy framework. The resulting pattern is not policy paralysis but selective governance, where distributive outcomes are negotiated politically rather than planned strategically.

Peripheral and border states represent a distinctive variant of coalition governance. These regions frequently experience historical marginalisation, persistent security concerns, and limited economic diversification, all of which constrain state capacity. Coalition politics in such settings intersects with structural dependence on the central government. Coalition-ruled states rely disproportionately on central fiscal transfers, security deployments, and administrative interventions, intensifying centre-state bargaining asymmetries (Arora & Kailash, 2018). While this dependence limits subnational autonomy, it simultaneously heightens the political salience of coalition stability. In border states, coalition governance cannot be analysed solely through domestic policy outcomes, as internal political management overlaps directly with external strategic concerns. Coalition instability therefore shapes the effectiveness and credibility of national foreign policy implementation.

Political Context of Manipur: Ethnicity, Conflict, and Governance

Manipur's political context is shaped by the interaction of ethnic heterogeneity, protracted conflict, and fragile governance structures. The division between the Meitei population concentrated in the Imphal Valley and Naga and Kuki-Zo communities inhabiting the surrounding hill districts structures political institutions, resource allocation, and territorial claims. Since the post-independence period, ethnic identities have been politicised through demands for recognition, autonomy, and protection, giving rise to multiple insurgent movements and sustained contestations over state authority (Singh, 2010).

The persistence of low-intensity conflict has institutionalised a security-centric governance framework. The prolonged deployment of central security forces and the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act have blurred civilian-military boundaries and weakened democratic accountability (Baruah, 2005). Although justified in terms of maintaining territorial integrity and internal order, this framework has contributed to public distrust in state institutions and constrained policy autonomy at the state level.

Statehood in 1972 did not resolve these structural vulnerabilities. Electoral politics increasingly mirrored ethnic segmentation, producing fragmented mandates and rendering single-party majority governments rare (Haokip, 2013). Coalition governments thus emerged as the primary mechanism of political formation. Regional parties frequently acted as kingmakers, enabling political inclusion while generating instability through leadership

rivalries and opportunistic realignments. Governance deficits in Manipur are therefore deeply political, arising from the interaction between ethnic mobilisation, coalition bargaining, and central intervention. These dynamics directly affect the state's capacity to manage cross-border interactions with Myanmar, where ethnic continuities, insurgent sanctuaries, and informal flows of people and goods link domestic political stability to regional security concerns.

Development of Coalition Governance in Manipur

Coalition governance in Manipur emerged from intensified electoral competition and progressive party system fragmentation from the late 1990s onwards. As electoral participation expanded and ethnic mobilisation deepened, no single party consistently secured a legislative majority. Regional and ethnic parties acquired disproportionate bargaining power despite limited electoral bases, making coalition formation transactional rather than programmatic (Singh, 2015).

Political volatility characterised these coalitions. Frequent changes in leadership and alliance realignments disrupted administrative continuity and weakened bureaucratic authority. Empirical research indicates that such instability exacerbates governance deficits in conflict-affected regions by discouraging long-term planning and undermining policy credibility (Lacina, 2009). In Manipur, this instability manifested in uneven development outcomes, delays in infrastructure projects, and inconsistent implementation of centrally sponsored schemes.

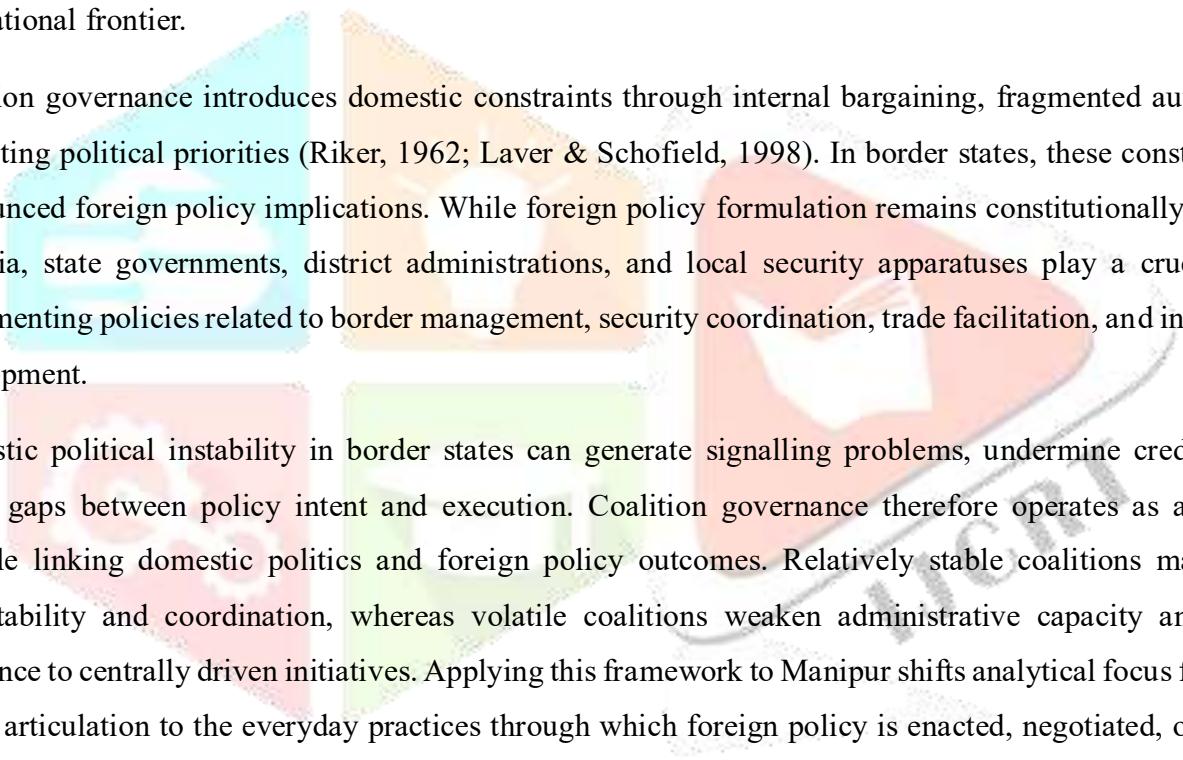
Coalition governance also reshaped centre-state relations. Given persistent security challenges and limited fiscal capacity, coalition governments relied heavily on New Delhi for security deployment and financial support. Central intervention during coalition breakdowns reflected concerns that political instability could undermine internal security and regional strategic interests. While coalitions facilitated political inclusion, their fragility constrained the state's capacity to act as a coherent political unit. Coalition governance thus institutionalised instability rather than resolving structural vulnerabilities, reshaping state capacity and policy implementation in ways central to Manipur's foreign policy relevance.

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy: Analytical Linkages

Foreign Policy Analysis has long challenged the assumption that states act as unitary actors in international politics. Putnam's (1988) two-level game framework conceptualises foreign policy as simultaneously negotiated at domestic and international levels. Although originally applied to national executives, this analytical logic extends to federal systems in which subnational political dynamics condition policy implementation. Beyond constraining policy execution, coalition governance also reshapes the incentive structures through which subnational actors engage with foreign policy implementation. Coalition executives operate under constant pressures of intra-coalition bargaining, electoral vulnerability, and ethnic balancing, which influence how external initiatives are prioritised and interpreted at the local level. In border states, where foreign policy manifests through security operations, infrastructure projects, and cross-border regulation, these incentives frequently privilege short-term political management over long-term strategic alignment.

Consequently, foreign policy implementation becomes contingent not only on administrative capacity but also on the political calculus of coalition survival.

This dynamic complicates traditional two-level models by introducing a subnational intermediary layer between central decision-making and international outcomes. While Putnam's framework emphasises national executives negotiating across domestic and international arenas, coalition-governed border states function as additional veto points where policies can be delayed, diluted, or selectively enforced. This does not imply deliberate obstruction; rather, it reflects governance systems in which fragmented authority and negotiated legitimacy shape state behaviour. Recognising coalition governance as an intervening layer therefore allows foreign policy analysis to move beyond formal institutional competencies and towards the political conditions under which policy credibility is produced. In Manipur, this intermediary role is particularly salient, as coalition dynamics directly condition the translation of strategic intent into operational practice along a sensitive international frontier.



Coalition governance introduces domestic constraints through internal bargaining, fragmented authority, and competing political priorities (Riker, 1962; Laver & Schofield, 1998). In border states, these constraints have pronounced foreign policy implications. While foreign policy formulation remains constitutionally centralised in India, state governments, district administrations, and local security apparatuses play a crucial role in implementing policies related to border management, security coordination, trade facilitation, and infrastructure development.

Domestic political instability in border states can generate signalling problems, undermine credibility, and widen gaps between policy intent and execution. Coalition governance therefore operates as a mediating variable linking domestic politics and foreign policy outcomes. Relatively stable coalitions may enhance predictability and coordination, whereas volatile coalitions weaken administrative capacity and generate resistance to centrally driven initiatives. Applying this framework to Manipur shifts analytical focus from formal policy articulation to the everyday practices through which foreign policy is enacted, negotiated, or diluted at the subnational level.

Manipur in India's Foreign Policy Interface

Manipur occupies a strategically significant position within India's eastern foreign policy landscape, particularly in relation to Myanmar. Sharing a long and porous border, the state functions as a gateway for cross-border trade, connectivity, and cultural exchange. India's eastward engagement has consistently identified Manipur as a logistical bridge to Southeast Asia, exemplified by projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (Ghosh, 2016). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends heavily on local governance capacity and political stability.

Coalition governments in Manipur face persistent challenges in aligning domestic political priorities with external objectives. Ethnic sensitivities surrounding land, identity, and territorial authority intersect with cross-

border issues, politicising refugee movements, informal trade, and kinship ties. Frequent leadership changes disrupt institutional memory, delay project implementation, and shape perceptions of India's reliability as a regional partner.

Security cooperation along the India–Myanmar border further illustrates these dynamics. Insurgent groups operating across the border require coordinated intelligence sharing and enforcement, yet domestic political divisions constrain cooperation among state authorities, central agencies, and foreign counterparts (Bhaumik, 2009). Manipur thus functions as an interface where foreign policy is filtered through subnational political contexts rather than a passive periphery.

Coalition Governance and Foreign Policy Outcomes

Coalition governance in Manipur shapes foreign policy outcomes primarily at the level of implementation rather than formulation, which constitutionally remains the prerogative of the central government. Political instability associated with fragmented coalitions erodes administrative continuity, disrupts bureaucratic routines, and delays infrastructure and connectivity projects central to India's regional diplomacy. Frequent leadership changes and shifting alliance structures weaken institutional memory, complicate inter-agency coordination, and reduce the capacity of state institutions to sustain long-term engagement with initiatives related to border management, trade facilitation, and security cooperation. As a result, the translation of national foreign policy objectives into effective local action becomes uneven and contingent (Riker, 1962; Lacina, 2009).

Coalition bargaining further prioritises short-term political survival over strategic alignment with centrally articulated foreign policy goals. Ministerial portfolios, development allocations, and administrative decisions are often shaped by coalition arithmetic rather than programmatic coherence. While distributive politics are common across Indian states, their consequences are magnified in a border state like Manipur, where governance shortcomings generate immediate cross-border implications. Weak policy coherence at the subnational level complicates alignment with long-term external commitments and undermines the cumulative strategic value of foreign policy initiatives (Chhibber & Murali, 2006; Arora & Kailash, 2018).

Coalition governance also reshapes centre–state coordination in ways that affect foreign policy credibility. Fragmented state leadership complicates communication and cooperation between state authorities and central ministries responsible for external affairs, home affairs, and border management. In response, central agencies may bypass state institutions to ensure policy execution, particularly in matters of security and infrastructure. Although administratively expedient, such bypasses generate legitimacy deficits and local resistance, reinforcing perceptions of marginalisation and weakening the local political foundations necessary for effective policy implementation in sensitive border regions (Hocking, 1999; Baruah, 2005).

Beyond these coordination challenges, coalition governance influences the temporal horizon of foreign policy implementation. Coalition governments operating with narrow legislative margins and unstable alliances tend to function within compressed political timeframes. This temporal constraint incentivises policy choices that

yield immediate political returns while discouraging sustained engagement with long-gestation initiatives such as connectivity corridors, border infrastructure, and institutionalised security cooperation. Under conditions of coalition fragility, such initiatives are often pursued intermittently or selectively, reducing their cumulative strategic impact (Laver & Schofield, 1998; Singh, 2015).

This temporal mismatch between national foreign policy objectives and subnational political cycles carries broader strategic consequences. Delays and discontinuities in implementation not only reduce administrative efficiency but also weaken India's signalling capacity vis-à-vis neighbouring states. From the perspective of external partners, inconsistent execution at the border undermines perceptions of reliability and commitment, even when strategic intent at the central level remains stable. Coalition governance thus shapes foreign policy outcomes not through overt opposition or policy reversal, but through the gradual erosion of implementation credibility. The effectiveness of India's eastern engagements is therefore inseparable from the quality and stability of subnational governance in Manipur (Putnam, 1988; Bhaumik, 2009).

Conclusion

This article has examined coalition governance in Manipur as a critical site where domestic politics intersects with foreign policy implementation. Although Manipur does not participate in formal foreign policy formulation, its internal political arrangements decisively shape how external policy objectives are translated into practice along India's eastern frontier. Coalition governance affects foreign policy outcomes through administrative continuity, policy coherence, and centre-state coordination.

The Manipur case extends foreign policy analysis beyond national executives to subnational governance structures, reinforcing the understanding of foreign policy as a multi-level process. From a federal perspective, it reveals a paradox of dependence: while coalition-ruled border states rely on central support, their political stability is indispensable for achieving national strategic objectives. Strengthening administrative continuity and insulating long-term strategic initiatives from coalition volatility are therefore strategic necessities. Comparative research across other border states and federal systems can further test the framework developed here.

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