

B. R. Ambedkar's Foreign Policy Thought and its Contemporary Relevance

Akanksha

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,

Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi, 110068

Abstract

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is widely known as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and also the champion of social justice, but unfortunately missing from both IR history and Postcolonial diplomatic studies. This paper tries to recover the neglected contribution made by Ambedkar directly or indirectly to India's Foreign Policy by examining his speeches, writings, and Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD). It highlights that Ambedkar envisioned a foreign policy deeply rooted in strategic self-reliance, constitutional internationalism, and a moral commitment to global justice. Ambedkar can be seen as the cosmopolitan realist-linking national sovereignty with both human rights and economic strength which is different from Nehru's idealism or Gandhi's pacifism.

Enough literature on other Indian thinkers such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and M. N. Roy is available and consequently, the "Foreign-policy Ambedkar" remains as an ellipsis in mainstream International Relations scholarship. In the light of this, Suraj Yengde argues, "there is not a single study that analyses the international outlook of Ambedkar in the field of Indian diplomacy or global political imagination." Thus Ambedkar, the forgotten diplomat, emerges as a vital yet underexplored thinker in the canon of Indian International Thought. This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity- challenge because secondary data is scattered hence making close reading of primary sources only, and opportunity because Ambedkar's views on IR are overlooked and now exploring those will offer a distinctive foundation for rethinking IR in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Foreign Policy, Internationalism, Postcolonial IR, Human rights, Cosmopolitanism.

Introduction

The intellectual formation of B. R. Ambedkar as an economist at Columbia University under John Dewey and later at the London School of Economics gave him a rational and scientific understanding of statecraft, distinct from the moralistic idiom that dominated India's nationalist discourse. He has worked extensively in the field of caste, philosophy, social justice, democracy and constitutionalism. Yet, beneath his towering intellectual legacy lies an unexplored dimension of his thoughts on India's position in the world. The traditional narrative of Indian Foreign Policy is dominated by conventional thinkers and Ambedkar is seldom regarded as a foreign-policy thinker. His insights on nationalism, sovereignty, defence, global justice along with his economic writings reveal a sophisticated awareness of international dynamics that remains remarkably relevant to contemporary debates on India's external engagements. His ideas on Foreign-policy emerged during the 1940s and 1950s because this was the period when questions of sovereignty, decolonisation, and international order were being fundamentally debated and redefined. Unlike the idealist tendencies of Nehruvian NAM and Gandhian pacifism, he proposed for "cosmopolitan realism" which means it's a kind of foreign policy rooted in pragmatic assessment of national interest but guided by universal ethical principles. He argued in multiple speeches during the 1940s that independence without economic strength and self-reliance is hollow because moral leadership in the global world requires material strength. He also highlighted that a weak nation could neither defend its ideals nor contribute meaningfully to peace. Withstanding this, his conviction led him to focus on these three pillars of responsible global engagement- industrial capacity, technological development, and constitutional adherence to international law. By including Article 51, which focuses on the principles of international cooperation and respect for treaty obligation, to the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar tried to institutionalise a glimpse of foreign policy that can balance idealism with prudence. As the Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-1946), he emphasised on military professionalism and the creation of a modern navy capable of protecting India's both land and maritime frontiers as he considered national security the precondition for both internal social reform and international credibility. As he said, "A country that cannot defend its borders will find its Constitution and its ideals reduced to parchment." And with this viewpoint, Ambedkar has emerged or been identified as a "pragmatic realist" because his statement reveals a realist temperament.

Ankit Kawade has recently drawn attention towards what Suraj Yengde terms the "ellipsis of Dalit internationalism" which means systematic marginalisation of subaltern voices in global political thought. With respect to this, Ambedkar's foreign policy reflections gain prominent importance of offering a normative foundation for a more inclusive and justice oriented conception of IR. And, this helps in bridging the gap between domestic emancipation and global equality. Hence, his ideas are worth exploring as it allows us to redefine and reimagine diplomacy as the pursuit of both strategic interests and ethical consideration.

Ambedkar also criticised Nehruvian Non-Alignment Policy because he doubted whether a newly independent and economically fragile country could afford a posture of detached neutrality while Nehru sought to lead the post-colonial world through moral persuasion and the language of peace. For Ambedkar, neutrality without strength risked isolation and morality without means invited coercion. He warned against romanticism in foreign policy in one of the parliamentary speeches in 1951, saying that “India’s diplomacy must first secure the material conditions of survival- food, energy, and defence- before aspiring to moral leadership.” This argument goes parallel with the classical realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, who similarly held that moral purpose must be tempered by an awareness of power. National interest is multidimensional as per the understanding of Ambedkar as it includes security interest (protection of territorial integrity); economic interest (industrial self-reliance and control over strategic resources); and moral interest (preservation of India’s democratic ethos in an age of ideological polarisation).

During the early 1950s, his remarks on China and Tibet expressed concern over Beijing’s expansionism and the danger of treating communism as a benign neighbourly ideology. In respect to this, Ambedkar predicted strategic anxieties that would later dominate Indian policy after 1962, confirming his foresight as a realist thinker who balanced moral caution with geopolitical prudence. At the same time, Ambedkar’s realism was not immoral. He consistently rejected the reduction of diplomacy to sheer opportunism. He advocated an ethical realism- a conviction that power must serve justice, and justice must be defended by power. He viewed the state as a moral agent accountable to its citizens and to humanity, and therefore bound to respect international law and treaty obligations. The fusion of ethics and realism can be seen in the Indian Constitution under Article 51 as it advocates the promotion of international peace, arbitration, and respect for treaties. Additionally, Ambedkar did not see constitutional idealism as contradictory to strategic interests as he believed that codified laws could discipline the excesses of power.

Literature Review

The academic literature on India’s foreign policy is dominated by the elite figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, MN Roy, etc. Existing works on Indian diplomacy have tended to frame the intellectual origins of a country’s external engagement through the paradigms of Nehruvian idealism, Gandhian pacifism, and realist pragmatism (Appadorai, 1981; Nanda, 1989; Raghavan, 2010). Ambedkar’s foreign policy perspectives are embedded across his diverse corpus of writings, discussions, speeches, and constituent assembly debates. His economic and monetary works, particularly *The Problem of Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution* (1923), reveals his initial concerns with the relationship between political sovereignty and economic dependence as he viewed industrialisation and economic stability as the two pillars of genuine independence, a view that connects directly to questions of external autonomy and diplomatic agency (Ambedkar 1923). After becoming a member of Viceroy’s Executive Council for Labour (1942-1946), Ambedkar delivered a speech on industrial and defense preparedness, emphasising that India’s ability to participate in world

affairs depended upon its economic monetisation (Ambedkar 2014a). His wartime address “*Nationalism, a Means to an End*” (1942) argued that nationalism should serve as an instrument for achieving internationalism- an idea that presaged his later advocacy of global peace and legal world order (Ambedkar, 2014b). Also during the Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD), his international outlook was highlighted through his interventions on Article 51, which commits Indian state to promote peace, respect for International Law and arbitration- reveal his belief that moral responsibility should be constitutionalised as a guiding principle of external conduct (Sagar, 2019). Additionally, in early Parliamentary Debates (1951-1955), he warned against “*romanticism in Indian foreign policy*” and insisted that moral aspirations must rest on defense and industrial capability (Ambedkar, 2014c). One of the most striking sources evidencing Ambedkar’s global consciousness is his 1946 correspondence with African-American thinker, W. E. B. Du Bois. In this letter exchange, Ambedkar sought information about petitions on racial discrimination submitted to the United Nations by African-American organisations. He intended to explore the possibility of internationalising the cause of India’s Depressed Classes through similar mechanisms (Du Bois and Ambedkar, 1946). This initiative, often termed as “*Dalit Internationalism*,” positions Ambedkar as one of the earliest Indian advocates of linking domestic social justice struggles with international human rights discourses (Yengde, 2023). Rahul Sagar (2019) provides a constitutionalist interpretation of Ambedkar’s Internationalism, focusing on the framing of Article 51 to the Indian Constitution. He highlights that Ambedkar institutionalized the moral aspiration of foreign policy without constraining its pragmatic flexibility. Similarly, Valerian Rodrigues (2004) situates Ambedkar within the broader canon of Indian political philosophy, emphasising his belief that moral order either domestic or international must rest on a rational legal foundation rather than mere idealism and sentiments. In the domain of political economy perspective, Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) and Ananya Vajpeyi (2012) noted Ambedkar's insistence on industrial and economic self-reliance was not purely domestic; it was directly linked to his understanding of global power hierarchies and India’s need for strategic autonomy. His emphasis on state-led development and social democracy anticipates later discourses on economic sovereignty that define India’s external posture. In the global world system from International Relation Theory, scholars such as Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2019) have called for a broader inclusion of non-Western thinkers into the global IR framework. Although Ambedkar is really mentioned in such discussions, his integration of realism, constitutional ethics, and social justice provides a unique non-western model of moral statecraft. Ambedkar’s approach resonates with Acharya’s notion of global IR which seeks to pluralise the discipline by recognising ideas emerging from Asia, Africa, and Latin America as equally constitutive of international thought. Ambedkar’s thought intersects with three well established theoretical traditions in international relation thematically- classical realism, liberal internationalism and postcolonial ethics. His recognition that national interest and capability form the foundation of diplomacy parallels realist tenets (Morgenthau, 1948). Yet, by emphasising on peace, human rights and international law into India’s constitutional order, he extends liberal internationalist ideas through a postcolonial lens. Furthermore, his support for subaltern participation in global

affairs prefigures contemporary postcolonial and critical theories, emphasising inclusivity and global justice in world politics (Chandhoke, 2015). Ambedkar advocated for Cosmopolitan Realism that bridges the dichotomy between power politics and moral idealism. He neither viewed international morality as utopian nor power as immortal. Instead, he argues that morality derives legitimacy only when anchored in material capability, and power becomes just only when disciplined by ethical restraint. This dual logic forms the cornerstone of Ambedkar's Foreign policy thought.

Despite growing academic attention to IR discourse, several research gaps still remain, and this research responds directly to these gaps by reconstructing Ambedkar's worldview through textual and contextual analysis as it offers an integrated understanding of his economic, security and ethical dimensions of foreign policy.

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine, explore, reconstruct and analyse B. R. Ambedkar's foreign-policy. To achieve this objective, the study focuses on this research question:

“How did B. R. Ambedkar conceptualized India's role in the International system, and in what ways does his thought provide a framework for both moral idealism and strategic realism in contemporary foreign policy?”

With detailed study of both primary and secondary sources including Ambedkar's writings and speeches (Government of Maharashtra volumes), Constituent Assembly Debates, and recent scholarly reinterpretations, this paper tries to situate Ambedkar as not only a constitutionalist but also as a realist international thinker. Hans Morgenthau (1948), the father of classical realism, views International politics as the struggle for power and morality is subordinated to prudence and necessity. However, Ambedkar diverged from orthodox realism by rejecting its moral pessimism. For him, power without justice leads to domination, and justice without power leads to dependence. Hence, he envisioned a moralised realism- a new framework where capability serves as the foundation for ethical action in world affairs. This view resonates with the notion of ethical realism later developed in critical IR theory, which argues that morality and interest are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing (Chandhoke, 2015). Ambedkar's advocacy of Article 15 in the Indian constitution parallels the liberal tradition Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. Ambedkar sought to democratise international law by ensuring that newly Independent nations participated as equals rather than as subjects of Western power (Sagar, 2019). Postcolonial theory criticises the Eurocentric assumption embedded in mainstream IR, emphasising the experiences, knowledge systems and voices of the Global South (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). Ambedkar's intellectual project, rooted in anti-caste, struggle and colonial critique, embodies precisely this epistemic standpoint. His notion of Dalit Internationalism- expressed in his correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois (1946)- extends the moral logic of emancipation beyond national boundaries, linking India's internal hierarchies to global structures of inequality.

After synthesising all these traditions, this study comes with the concept of Cosmopolitan realism as its central theoretical lens. Ambedkar's Cosmopolitan realism depends upon the three interdependent foundations- security realism (power and preparedness are prerequisites of peace); economic sovereignty (industrial and financial independence sustain political autonomy); and ethical internationalism (justice, equality and respect for law that regulate the exercise of power). Hence, this theoretical framework will allow the study to interpret scattered writings and speeches of Ambedkar on Indian foreign policy.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine B. R. Ambedkar's foreign policy. Within this qualitative framework, this research will employ the interpretative method for understanding the ideas, contexts, and meanings embedded in the texts and speeches of a historical thinker whose philosophy cannot be quantified but must be interpreted within its intellectual and political settings. By combining archival triangulation, textual analysis, and contextual interpretation, this study seeks to reconstruct Ambedkar's worldview as a coherent foreign policy framework that integrates realism, economic nationalism, and moral universalism.

Key Findings and Analytical Arguments

This section presents the key findings from all textual and contextual analysis of Ambedkar's speeches, debates, writings, and Parliamentary interventions. The results are categorised into these three dimensions of his foreign policy thought:

1. Realist security orientation
2. Economic diplomacy and self-reliance
3. Ethical Internationalism and constitutional morality

Collectively, all these three pillars form Ambedkar's integrated vision of Cosmopolitan realism, a foreign policy philosophy that blends national strength with moral responsibility.

1. Realist security orientation: Power as the basis of Morality

The engagement of Ambedkar with foreign affairs was deeply rooted in the conviction that the survival and credibility of a nation depend upon its material capability and strategic preparedness. In the wartime during the 1940s, he addressed in one of the Parliamentary speeches and consistently warned against the dangers of what he termed as romantic diplomacy, the pursuit of lofty moral ideals without corresponding power. He argued that peace in IR cannot be achieved through moral rhetoric alone, but through organised strength, industrial capacity and professional defence (Ambedkar, 2014a). His policy initiatives such as improving workers' welfare in industries and rationalising the recruitment of military, underscored his understanding that national security is intertwined with economic stability. For Ambedkar, a strong industrial base was the backbone of military capability and diplomatic autonomy. This realist orientation echoes the classic maxim that power must precede peace. Yet his realism was not immoral, it was tempered by constitutional restraint and ethical purpose. Consequently, Ambedkar's realism was defensive rather than aggressive as it sought to protect India's sovereignty through preparedness, not expansionism.

Moreover, his security doctrine depends on these three factors:

- Political independence without material strength is fragile.
- Defence capability underpins diplomatic credibility.
- Strategic morality is meaningful only when supported by power.

2. Economic Diplomacy and Self-reliance: The Infrastructure of Sovereignty

The second pillar of Ambedkar's foreign policy framework is the economic philosophy. Even before the independence of India, he recognised the economic dependency turns into political vulnerability in the long run. In *The problem of the Rupee* (1923), he diagnosed colonial India's economic subjugation as a consequence of monetary mismanagement and industrial underdevelopment. While his critiques of external financial control reflected a profound understanding of the global economic order, and hence foreshadowing postcolonial dependency theories.

Ambedkar's belief in self-reliance (swadeshi in the economy) was rooted in structural realism rather than isolationism. He argued that an independent India must develop heavy industries, nationalize essential sectors, and invest in technological education to avoid subordination in the global economy (Ambedkar 2014b). In his vision, economic diplomacy requires balanced engagement of protection and independence. As a Labour Member, Ambedkar's representation of India in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) further demonstrated his pragmatic multilateralism. He always supported international cooperation on labour standards but rejected external interference in domestic policy. His speeches at the ILO reveal his strong awareness that participation in international institutions could serve as an instrument of bargaining power for developing nations (ILO Archives, 1944-1945). This example of strategic multilateralism reshaped India's approach of global governance through participation guided by national interests.

Ambedkar also linked economic justice to the domestic sphere and international sphere. He argued that a nation divided by social inequality cannot project moral authority internationally. Therefore, economic democracy was not merely an internal goal but a foreign policy asset as well. Through this lens, Ambedkar's economic diplomacy can be summarized as a three-tiered structure:

- Industrial capacity as the foundation of sovereignty
- Strategic self-reliance as the principle of external autonomy
- International labour cooperation as an ethical extension of domestic social justice.

Hence, Ambedkar's foreign policy economics fused realism with reform, creating a doctrine of developmental sovereignty that aligns with modern notions of strategic autonomy.

3. Ethical Internationalism and Constitutional Morality: Justice Beyond Borders

The third and the most distinguished pillar of Ambedkar's foreign policy thought is his ethical internationalism. He envisioned a moral community of nations where peace and equality are sustained by law. His commitment to the ideal found institutional expression in Article 51 of the Indian Constitution which enjoins the state to promote international peace, respect, international law and encourage arbitration in disputes. He considered this not a symbolic gesture, but a constitutional obligation reflecting India's moral character. Ambedkar's Cosmopolitan moralism was shaped by his personal and intellectual engagement with global ideas. His correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois (1946) is a landmark moment in cross-civilisational sodality, linking caste discrimination in India with racial oppression in the United States. By appealing to the newly formed United Nations as a forum for international justice, Ambedkar pre-figured the postcolonial turn toward International human rights diplomacy. Scholars have described this as the foundation of Dalit internationalism, an effort to universalise India's internal quest for equality (Yengde, 2023).

Unlike Gandhi's pacifist universalism or Nehru's non-alignment idealism, Ambedkar's internationalism was constitutional, realist and rights-based. He argued that peace must rest on justice, and justice requires enforceable law. His constitutional vision thus extended the domestic rule of law into the international domain, creating what may be called a juridical cosmopolitanism.

In essence, Ambedkar's ethical internationalism focuses on these three aspects:

- The rule of law must govern not only citizens, but also states
- The internal moral order of a nation determines its external credibility
- International peace is sustainable only through justice and equality.

Hence, through these above principles, Ambedkar transcended both nationalist parochialism and utopian cosmopolitanism. His ethics were pragmatic, constitutional, and anchored in human dignity.

Synthesis: Ambedkar's Cosmopolitan Realism

Across these three dimensions of security, economy, and ethics, Ambedkar articulated a coherent and forward-looking doctrine of Cosmopolitan realism. His thought combines:

- The realist understanding of power as essential to sovereignty.
- The economic vision of self-reliance as the infrastructure of independence
- The ethical commitment to justice as the normative purpose of diplomacy.

This synthesis challenges both conventional and traditional dichotomy between idealism and realism. Ambedkar's realism is moral without being examined, and his idealism is pragmatic without being skeptical. Focusing upon universal ethics in material capability and constitutional responsibility, he created an indigenous Indian model of moral statecraft that remains relevant to the 21st century crisis of inequality, conflict, and moral legitimacy.

The findings of this study reveal that B. R. Ambedkar was a sophisticated foreign policy thinker whose ideas solve many dilemmas that continue to shape India's external engagements till today. His synthesis of realism, economic nationalism and moral universalism anticipates the complex challenges of a post colonial state seeking both autonomy and legitimacy in an unequal world.

In this section, Ambedkar's worldview is analysed in relation to these three broader debates:

1. The theory of global International Relations
2. India's pursuit of strategic autonomy
3. The moral foundations of contemporary diplomacy

1. Ambedkar and Global International Relations

The recent movement for global IR has called for a pluralisation of IR theory by incorporating non-Western intellectual traditions. Ambedkar's foreign policy thought exemplifies this agenda by offering a subaltern constitutionalist perspective that challenges Eurocentric assumptions about power, law, and morality. Whereas western realism emerged from the experiences of great powers navigating balance of power politics. Ambedkar realism evolved from the standpoint of a colonised, socially stratified society struggling for equality and recognition. This gives his thought a unique moral and epistemic orientation. Thus, through these dimensions, Ambedkar transformed international theory from an elite discourse of states into an inclusive conversation about humanity, dignity, and law. His views enrich global IR by bridging the gap amongst the political theory, Constitutional law, and diplomatic ethics.

2. Strategic Autonomy and Realist Foundations

Ambedkar emphasizes on capability and provides a foundational lens for understanding India's enduring quest for strategic autonomy. Long before the term became central to Indian diplomacy, Ambedkar articulated its essence through his insistence on industrial self-reliance and military professionalism. His vision of "freedom must be defended by force as well as by faith" captures the balance between the principle and pragmatism that still defines Indian statecraft. Modern foreign policy doctrine from non-alignment in the 1950s to multi-alignment in the 2020s reflects a deep rooted tension. Ambedkar identified this tension as the need to reconcile more aspiration with material constraint. The Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative which emphasizes on technology and industrial interdependence reflects Ambedkar's belief. As he believed that economic sovereignty is the infrastructure of foreign policy independence. In the era of renewed geopolitical competition, spanning broad disputes, energy security and technological dependence, Ambedkar's pragmatic realism offers a framework for evaluating foreign policy not merely by its ideals but by its institutional and industrial foundations.

3. Moral foundations of contemporary diplomacy

Ambedkar's ethical internationalism challenges both the amorality of traditional realism and the utopianism of moral idealism. Unlike many post colonial leaders who viewed international law with suspicion, Ambedkar regarded it as an instrument of equality among nations. For him, a rule-based order was not an imposition of the West, but a moral necessity for the weak to restrain the strong. In this regard, Ambedkar's thought remains highly relevant to India's current diplomatic narrative. Whether in climate negotiation, technology governance, or global health diplomacy, India's emphasis on fairness, legality, and development reflects Ambedkar's constitutional ethics on a global scale. His belief that domestic constitutional values must shape international conduct provides a moral compass for India's engagement with the world. Ambedkar's recognition that systems of oppression like colonialism, racism, casteism, etc are structurally linked anticipates 21st century debates on global justice and intersectionality. Thus, Ambedkar offers a theoretical vocabulary for what may be termed human centric diplomacy, a form of engagement that aligns national interest with human dignity.

The above discussion reveals that Ambedkar's foreign policy thought continues to align with modern challenges. His cosmopolitan realism integrates security with ethics, and sovereignty with justice, hence offering a rare balance that most IR theories struggle to maintain. In doing so, Ambedkar not only enriched the global IR framework but also provided India with a philosophical foundation for 21st century diplomacy, a vision where strength and morality reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Conclusion

This study set out to reconstruct and analyse B. R. Ambedkar's foreign-policy thought of as an integral yet overlooked component of Indian political philosophy. Through qualitative textual analysis of his writings, speeches, debates and Parliamentary discussions, it demonstrated that Ambedkar developed a coherent worldview. And, his worldview can be described as a Cosmopolitan realism, a framework that unites national capability, economic self-reliance and a moral responsibility. Unlike traditional realist thinkers, Ambedkar did not separate power from ethics (like Machiavelli) rather he viewed them as mutually strengthening foundations of a just international order. By situating Ambedkar within postcolonial and global IR frameworks, this research also expands the canon of international thought. His integration of realism, liberal institutionalism, and social justice provides an unmatched Indian contribution to non-Western theories of International Relations. For contemporary India, Ambedkar's cosmopolitan realism offers enduring guidance as diplomacy must be founded on capability, guided by ethics, and executed in the spirit of human dignity. At last, it can be concluded that ultimately Ambedkar emerges not only as a social reformer or the chairman of the drafting committee, but also as a visionary diplomat of ideas, a thinker who imagined a moral world order rooted in equality, peace and justice. His legacy reminds us that true independence is sustained not merely by political freedom, but by moral courage to exert power responsibly in the service of humanity.

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