Chapter-25
Realist Diplomacy in Global History: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the Architecture of State Formation

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Abstract

This chapter situates Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel within the global tradition of realist statecraft by interpreting the integration of India between 1947 and 1950 as a paradigmatic case of postcolonial state-formation realism. International Relations scholarship has long associated realism with interstate rivalry, balance-of-power politics, and strategic competition among already consolidated states. Such a framing presumes the prior existence of sovereign political units capable of engaging in external balancing. The Indian transition to independence challenges this assumption. At the moment of British withdrawal, the subcontinent possessed juridical recognition but lacked territorial consolidation, administrative cohesion, and internal security. Partition violence, mass migration, and the lapse of British paramountcy over more than 560 princely states created conditions in which sovereignty was declared but not yet operational. In this fragile context, Patel's political actions constituted not merely domestic administration but a form of realist diplomacy directed toward the construction of the state itself.

Drawing on historiographical debates, constitutional deliberations, administrative developments, and comparative political history, the chapter advances three central claims. First, Patel practiced a distinctive mode of realism concerned with preventing fragmentation rather than maximizing external power. His strategic sequencing—negotiation, calibrated pressure, selective coercion, and rapid institutional absorption—demonstrates a logic of survival grounded in territorial continuity and administrative integration. Second,

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the chapter introduces the concept of administrative realism: the use of bureaucratic capacity, fiscal integration, and civil service unity as instruments of diplomatic leverage. In this view, the ability to govern becomes itself a strategic resource. Third, the chapter argues that Patel's statecraft embodied a responsibility-based ethical framework in which limited coercion was justified to prevent systemic disorder and large-scale violence.

Through case studies of Junagadh, Hyderabad, and the broader accession process, the analysis shows how political legitimacy was framed as restoration of order rather than conquest. Comparative reflections on other state-builders in global history illuminate both parallels and divergences, underscoring the distinctive character of integration without prolonged civil war. By expanding realism to include the foundational stage of state creation, the chapter contributes to a more global understanding of diplomatic practice. It proposes that postcolonial experiences are not peripheral to theory but central to its refinement. Patel emerges not only as India's unifier but as a practitioner whose actions illuminate how sovereignty is constructed before it is defended, and how political survival becomes the highest achievement of realist diplomacy in moments of systemic vulnerability.

Keywords: Political Integration, Nation-Building Strategy, Administrative Statecraft, Territorial Consolidation, Early Indian Foreign Policy Foundations

Introduction

1) Reframing Realism through State Formation

Realism is among the most influential traditions in the study of international relations. From its classical formulations to its structural variants, realism is generally understood as a theory explaining how sovereign states behave in an anarchic international system. The central assumption is that because no higher authority exists above states, political actors prioritize survival, security, and power. Much of the literature — from the historical reflections of Thucydides to the structural arguments of Kenneth Waltz — focuses on

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competition among already established political units. War, deterrence, alliances, and balance of power constitute the primary empirical material through which realism has been conceptualized and debated.

Yet this familiar framing presumes a prior condition that is rarely interrogated: the existence of a functioning state. Realism explains how states survive in anarchy, but not how they become states capable of survival. The twentieth century's experience of decolonization challenges this assumption. Across Asia and Africa, political communities emerged not into stable sovereignty but into institutional fragility, territorial uncertainty, and administrative discontinuity. Their problem was not simply how to compete internationally but whether they could exist long enough to participate in that competition. In such contexts, realism cannot be limited to external rivalry; it must address the prior question of political consolidation.

The Indian transition to independence in 1947 exemplifies this foundational dilemma. The end of colonial rule did not produce an immediately coherent state but a political space filled with uncertainty. Partition triggered unprecedented migration and violence, administrative authority fractured, and hundreds of princely states became legally autonomous after the lapse of British paramountcy. International recognition existed in principle, yet internal authority remained incomplete. The leadership confronted a paradox: sovereignty without control. A nation recognized in law could still fail in practice if territorial and administrative cohesion were not rapidly established.

It is within this context that the political role of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel acquires theoretical significance beyond national history. His actions during 1947–1950 are typically described in the language of national integration or administrative consolidation. While accurate, such descriptions understate the strategic dimension of the problem he confronted. The challenge was not merely to incorporate territories but to prevent political disintegration at the moment of birth. Fragmentation would have transformed the subcontinent into multiple competing

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sovereignties, undermining economic viability, security coordination, and international credibility. The task therefore resembled a realist problem in its purest form: ensuring survival under conditions of uncertainty and limited capacity. This chapter proposes that Patel's statecraft represents a form of realism operating prior to traditional interstate competition a stage that may be termed state-formation realism. In this form, the central objective is not expansion, prestige, or balancing but the creation of an effective political unit. Territorial continuity, legitimacy, and administrative capability become instruments of survival. Negotiation replaces alliance diplomacy, calibrated coercion substitutes for war, and bureaucratic integration functions as power accumulation. The logic remains recognizably realist because it is guided by prudence, necessity, and the prevention of disorder, yet its arena is internal consolidation rather than external rivalry.

Reframing realism in this manner also expands its intellectual geography. Much of international relations theory developed from European historical experience, where states had long been consolidated before entering modern diplomatic competition. Consequently, realism evolved as a theory of relations among mature political entities. Postcolonial experiences reveal an earlier stage in the same logic: the struggle to transform legal independence into operational sovereignty. Instead of treating these experiences as anomalies or purely domestic processes, they can be read as evidence of realism's foundational phase. The making of a state precedes the behavior of a state.

The integration of princely states in India provides an unusually clear illustration of this process. Decisions were taken under severe time constraints, incomplete information, and high stakes. Excessive force risked prolonged instability, whereas excessive accommodation risked fragmentation. The chosen approach negotiation supported by credible coercive capacity and followed by rapid institutional absorption reflected a consistent strategic logic oriented toward durable unity. The objective was not domination but viability: creating

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conditions under which democratic politics and foreign policy could later function.

By situating Patel's actions within the conceptual vocabulary of realism, this chapter seeks to shift analytical perspective. Rather than asking whether integration was administratively efficient or morally justified alone, it examines how political order was constructed under existential uncertainty. Doing so allows the Indian experience to contribute to broader theoretical debates. Realism becomes not only a theory of how states interact but also a theory of how they come into being. The sections that follow therefore interpret the consolidation of India as a case of realist state formation. Through historical reconstruction and conceptual analysis, the chapter argues that the foundational moment of sovereignty often overlooked in international relations theory represents the earliest expression of realist reasoning. The survival of a political community begins not at the battlefield or negotiation table between states, but at the moment when authority first becomes effective within its borders.

2) Historiography: Competing Interpretations of Patel

The historical understanding of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has evolved through multiple interpretive traditions, each shaped by shifting political contexts, archival access, and changing methodological priorities. Although Patel is widely acknowledged as a central architect of India's territorial integration, the meaning of that achievement has been framed differently across generations of scholarship. Broadly speaking, four interpretive strands can be identified: the nationalist-integration narrative, the administrative-institutional interpretation, the comparative-political reading, and the critical-revisionist perspective. Together, they reveal both the richness of Patel studies and the conceptual gap that remains in situating his actions within global realist thought. The earliest and most influential strand may be termed the nationalist integration narrative. In biographical and commemorative works, Patel appears primarily as the "Iron Man" who unified a fragmented subcontinent through

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determination and patriotic resolve. Works such as those by Rajmohan Gandhi portray Patel as a decisive statesman whose firmness prevented the Balkanization of India. Similarly, memoirs by contemporaries such as V. P. Menon emphasize the dramatic urgency of accession negotiations and the scale of the achievement. In this narrative, integration is presented as both historically necessary and morally justified, often framed as the inevitable culmination of nationalist aspirations. While this literature rightly underscores the magnitude of the consolidation process, it tends to treat integration as a patriotic inevitability rather than as a contested and strategically calibrated political project. The focus rests more on outcome than on the strategic logic that produced it.

A second interpretive strand foregrounds Patel's administrative and institutional role. Scholars attentive to the mechanics of governance have highlighted his defense of the All India Services and his insistence on bureaucratic continuity during constitutional transition. In this reading, Patel emerges less as a charismatic unifier and more as a pragmatic institutional architect. Historians such as Ramachandra Guha situate Patel within the broader leadership constellation of the independence era, emphasizing his managerial competence and organizational discipline. This literature views integration not solely as political negotiation but as institutional consolidation—an achievement dependent on bureaucratic coordination, fiscal integration, and centralized authority. Yet, while illuminating the administrative dimension, this approach often separates governance from strategy. Bureaucratic continuity appears as technocratic prudence rather than as an instrument within a broader survival calculus.

A third line of interpretation situates Patel within comparative and strategic frameworks. Political historians such as Srinath Raghavan have examined early post-independence decision-making within a security and geopolitical context, emphasizing how leadership choices were shaped by immediate threats and limited capacity. This perspective highlights the contingent nature of integration and the

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compressed timeframe in which decisions were made. It underscores that accession was not automatic but required calibrated bargaining under uncertainty. However, even within such analyses, Patel's actions are rarely theorized explicitly as contributions to realism. They are described as pragmatic or strategic, but not systematically conceptualized within a broader theoretical architecture of state formation.

In contrast, critical and revisionist interpretations question the celebratory tone of earlier narratives. Some scholars have interrogated the coercive dimensions of integration, particularly in cases such as Hyderabad, arguing that the use of force complicates heroic portrayals. Others have emphasized tensions between centralization and federalism, suggesting that the drive for unity may have narrowed space for regional autonomy. Writers such as Perry Anderson have located integration within larger debates about postcolonial state formation and elite consolidation. Meanwhile, political sociologists like Paul Brass have examined how central authority interacted with communal and regional identities. These critiques deepen our understanding by foregrounding power asymmetries and democratic tensions, yet they often evaluate decisions normatively without reconstructing the structural fragility that defined 1947–1950.

Across these historiographical traditions, a common omission persists: the absence of a sustained theoretical framing of Patel's statecraft within global realist discourse. Integration is described as nationalist achievement, administrative necessity, or coercive centralization, but seldom as an instance of realist reasoning applied at the foundational stage of sovereignty. The implicit assumption in much of the literature is that realism belongs to interstate rivalry, whereas integration belongs to domestic politics. This disciplinary separation obscures the strategic continuity between internal consolidation and external survival.

The present reinterpretation seeks to bridge this gap. Rather than privileging biography, administration, or critique in isolation, it reconstructs the strategic logic that structured decision-making during the integration process. By situating Patel within a framework of state-formation realism, his

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actions appear not merely as patriotic firmness or bureaucratic competence but as calculated efforts to prevent fragmentation under extreme uncertainty. Negotiation, calibrated coercion, institutional absorption, and legitimacy framing emerge as components of a coherent survival strategy.

This reframing does not displace earlier interpretations; it synthesizes and extends them. The nationalist narrative captures the magnitude of unity achieved. The administrative approach highlights the institutional foundations of durability. Critical scholarship underscores tensions inherent in consolidation. State-formation realism integrates these strands by placing them within a hierarchy of survival priorities shaped by the exceptional vulnerability of the moment. In doing so, it relocates Patel from the margins of International Relations theory to its conceptual center, demonstrating that postcolonial state formation is not peripheral to realism but foundational to understanding how sovereignty itself is constructed.

3) The Political Context of 1947: Sovereignty without Control

On 15 August 1947, India achieved formal independence from British rule. In legal and symbolic terms, sovereignty had been transferred from empire to nation. Yet the political reality beneath this juridical transformation was far more fragile. Independence did not immediately yield a consolidated state; it produced instead a landscape marked by fragmentation, violence, and administrative uncertainty. The leadership inherited recognition without coherence — sovereignty without control.

The most immediate destabilizing force was Partition. The creation of Pakistan triggered one of the largest migrations in modern history, accompanied by communal violence on an unprecedented scale. Administrative structures in Punjab and Bengal collapsed under the weight of population transfers and insecurity. Refugee flows overwhelmed local governments, strained fiscal resources, and diverted political attention toward humanitarian crisis management. In such

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conditions, the central authority's capacity to project order was sharply limited. The newly independent state was compelled to function amid trauma rather than stability.

Simultaneously, the lapse of British paramountcy dissolved the constitutional framework that had previously bound more than 560 princely states to the imperial system. These entities, varying enormously in size and capability, regained formal autonomy. Legally, they were no longer subordinate to the Crown; politically, their future alignment was uncertain. Some were geographically embedded within Indian Territory yet governed by rulers hesitant to accede. Others entertained visions of independence or strategic bargaining between India and Pakistan. The subcontinent thus faced the possibility of territorial balkanization at the very moment it sought national consolidation.

This fragmentation was not merely geographic. Economic and infrastructural networks had been designed under imperial logic, not national integration. Railways, postal systems, military commands, and revenue mechanisms required rapid coordination across newly drawn borders and uncertain jurisdictions. Currency stabilization, food distribution, and industrial continuity demanded centralized authority, yet such authority could not operate effectively without territorial clarity. The risk was circular: weak integration undermined administrative capacity, and weak administrative capacity impeded integration.

The security environment compounded these vulnerabilities. Communal militias, displaced populations, and localized armed forces created a volatile internal landscape. The Indian Army itself was undergoing division between India and Pakistan, reducing immediate operational coherence. In Kashmir, political ambiguity soon escalated into armed conflict, drawing external pressure into an already unstable environment. The leadership could not assume a secure external perimeter while internal authority remained incomplete. The distinction between domestic and international insecurity blurred; internal fragmentation invited external intervention.

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Politically, the Constituent Assembly was engaged in drafting a democratic constitution even as territorial boundaries remained unsettled. The project of constitutionalism required stable jurisdiction, yet jurisdiction itself was in flux. Federal design depended upon which territories would ultimately accede, under what terms, and with what degree of autonomy. A prolonged period of uncertainty would have weakened both democratic legitimacy and international credibility. A state divided against itself would struggle to speak coherently in global forums or negotiate from a position of confidence.

In this environment, sovereignty functioned more as aspiration than as operational fact. International recognition provided legal personality, but effective authority required the consolidation of territory, administration, and coercive capacity. The leadership confronted a compressed timeline. Delay risked encouraging centrifugal tendencies among princely states and regional actors. Excessive coercion, however, risked international criticism and domestic backlash. The strategic dilemma lay in converting nominal independence into durable statehood before fragmentation became irreversible.

The scale of the challenge is often underestimated in retrospective narratives that emphasize the eventual success of integration. Yet in 1947 the outcome was not predetermined. Several princely rulers explored alternatives to accession, calculating their bargaining leverage amid uncertainty. Economic interdependence and geographic contiguity favored integration, but political will could not be assumed. Without rapid and credible consolidation, the subcontinent might have resembled other post-imperial regions where fragmented sovereignties produced prolonged instability.

Thus, the Indian state in 1947 occupied a paradoxical position. It possessed international legitimacy, nationalist mobilization, and an experienced political leadership. At the same time, it lacked unified territorial command, secure borders, and fully integrated institutions. The moment demanded decisions that balanced persuasion with resolve, legality with urgency, and federal accommodation with central

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authority. Political survival depended on transforming a patchwork of jurisdictions into a coherent sovereign unit.
This was the structural condition in which integration policy unfolded. The problem was not expansionist ambition but existential consolidation. Sovereignty without control is inherently unstable; it invites internal contestation and external exploitation. The urgency of 1947 therefore framed integration not as optional policy but as foundational necessity. To preserve independence, authority had to become effective across territory. Only then could constitutional democracy, economic planning, and foreign policy assume durable form. The consolidation of the Indian Union was thus inseparable from the very possibility of its survival.

4) Conceptual Framework: State-Formation Realism

Realism is conventionally defined as a theory of how states behave under anarchy. Whether articulated in classical form by Hans Morgenthau or in structural form by Kenneth Waltz, the core assumption remains consistent: the absence of a higher authority compels states to prioritize survival through power and prudence. Yet embedded within this formulation is an unexamined presupposition — that states already exist as coherent political units capable of pursuing security. The historical experience of decolonization complicates this premise. Newly independent polities often entered the international system without consolidated authority, unified administration, or territorial certainty. Their first realist problem was not balancing against rivals but preventing disintegration.
To capture this earlier stage, the concept of state-formation realism is proposed. State-formation realism refers to the strategic logic by which political leaders construct an effective sovereign authority under conditions of institutional fragility and territorial uncertainty. Its central objective is not relative advantage but political viability. The question shifts from "How does a state survive among other states?" to "How does a political community become a state capable of survival?"
In classical realism, power is frequently understood in military or material terms. State-formation realism expands

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this understanding by recognizing administrative and territorial coherence as primary sources of power. A fragmented territory, even if internationally recognized, cannot reliably mobilize resources, enforce law, or conduct diplomacy. Authority must first become operational within borders before it can be projected beyond them. Thus, sovereignty is not merely a legal status but a capacity — the ability to make and implement binding decisions across a defined space.

This framework rests upon five interrelated principles.

First, survival precedes ideology: In conditions of foundational uncertainty, normative preferences become secondary to the prevention of collapse. Political actors may possess ideological commitments — federalism, democracy, decentralization — but these cannot function without a minimum level of unity. The immediate priority becomes the preservation of a political arena in which ideological competition can later occur.

Second, territorial continuity precedes diplomacy: International engagement requires a defined jurisdiction. Diplomatic commitments lack credibility when authority within territory remains contested. The consolidation of borders therefore becomes an intrinsic component of foreign policy, not a separate domestic matter. The distinction between internal and external security dissolves during state formation.

Third, administrative capacity constitutes power: Unlike balance-of-power realism, where military strength dominates analysis, state-formation realism emphasizes bureaucracy as an instrument of survival. Taxation systems, policing networks, judicial authority, and communication infrastructure allow political decisions to take effect. A government unable to administer cannot deter challenges; institutional reach substitutes for sheer force.

Fourth, legitimacy reduces coercion: Force alone rarely produces durable consolidation. Political compliance depends upon acceptance by local elites and populations. Agreements that preserve dignity, property, or symbolic status often lower

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resistance and decrease enforcement costs. Legitimacy, in this sense, becomes a strategic resource rather than purely a moral aspiration.

Fifth, limited coercion prevents systemic breakdown: While legitimacy is central, the credible possibility of force remains essential. Strategic restraint the selective and proportional use of coercion signals resolve without generating prolonged conflict. The objective is not victory over an enemy but the prevention of cascading disorder.

Together these principles distinguish state-formation realism from both classical realism and liberal institutionalism. Classical realism presumes consolidated actors competing externally; liberalism presumes institutions moderating relations among them. State-formation realism precedes both. It operates in the moment when political authority is uncertain and institutional frameworks are incomplete. The relevant threat is not conquest but fragmentation.

This conceptualization also clarifies the relationship between ethics and necessity. Decisions taken under state-formation realism often appear harsh when judged against stable peacetime standards. Yet the guiding logic is preventive: limited coercion undertaken early may avert prolonged violence later. The moral horizon shifts from immediate consent to long-term stability. Political responsibility lies in minimizing total disorder rather than eliminating all compulsion.

Importantly, state-formation realism does not reject democratic or normative aspirations; it sequences them. Durable democratic practice requires a functioning state capable of guaranteeing rights and enforcing law. Without consolidation, political competition risks becoming violent contestation among rival authorities. Stability therefore becomes the enabling condition for liberty rather than its opponent.

The concept also expands the geographical scope of realist theory. Much of international relations scholarship derives from European historical experience, where state consolidation largely preceded modern diplomacy. Postcolonial contexts reveal a foundational stage previously

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overlooked — the construction of sovereignty itself. By incorporating this stage, realism becomes not merely a theory of great-power rivalry but a broader explanation of political survival across diverse historical settings.

State-formation realism thus provides a lens through which integration processes can be analyzed as strategic action rather than administrative routine. Negotiation, institutional absorption, and calibrated coercion appear as components of a coherent survival strategy. The state is not assumed; it is built. Only after this construction can familiar realist dynamics balancing, deterrence, alliance formation — meaningfully operate.

5) Case Studies in Applied Realist Statecraft

The logic of state-formation realism becomes most visible not in abstract principles but in concrete decisions taken under pressure. Between 1947 and 1950, the consolidation of the Indian Union unfolded through a sequence of negotiations and interventions that combined persuasion, incentives, and calibrated coercion. Rather than a uniform policy applied mechanically, the process reflected adaptive strategy: different political contexts demanded different instruments, yet all were guided by the same objective — preventing fragmentation while minimizing prolonged conflict. The cases of Junagadh, Hyderabad, and the broader pattern of peaceful accessions illustrate how realist reasoning operated in practice.

Junagadh: Pressure without Immediate War

The princely state of Junagadh presented a challenge disproportionate to its size. Though geographically surrounded by Indian Territory, its ruler chose accession to Pakistan in 1947. The decision threatened not only territorial continuity but also political precedent. If geographically embedded states could align externally regardless of demographic and economic realities, a chain reaction of competing sovereignties might follow. Yet immediate military intervention risked international escalation and moral criticism.

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Under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the response unfolded incrementally. Economic links were tightened, political dissent within the state gained indirect encouragement, and diplomatic protests emphasized the impracticality of the accession. Rather than framing the issue as conquest, the strategy presented it as restoration of administrative normalcy. Only after internal governance collapsed and the ruler departed did forces move in to stabilize the situation. A plebiscite subsequently ratified accession, converting coercive pressure into political consent.

The significance of Junagadh lies in sequencing. Coercion was delayed until legitimacy could be claimed; pressure preceded force, and force was followed by ratification. The objective was not punishment but the creation of an outcome difficult to reverse diplomatically. Realism here operated through gradual escalation designed to avoid wider conflict while ensuring territorial clarity.

Hyderabad: Decisive but Limited Force

If Junagadh demonstrated incremental pressure, Hyderabad required decisive action. The state occupied the geographic center of the subcontinent and possessed substantial military resources. Its leadership sought independence rather than accession, raising the possibility of a sovereign enclave dividing the country's communications and administrative networks. Prolonged autonomy would have encouraged other regions to reconsider integration, undermining national coherence.

Negotiations continued for months in an effort to reach a settlement preserving dignity while ensuring accession. However, escalating internal unrest and paramilitary mobilization transformed the situation from diplomatic dispute to security threat. At this stage, delay risked wider instability. A short military operation — later termed "police action" — was undertaken to restore order and compel accession.

The operation's design reflected restraint rather than maximalism. Objectives were narrowly defined, civilian casualties were minimized relative to contemporary conflicts,

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and administrative absorption followed immediately. Instead of occupation, the emphasis was normalization. By acting quickly after demonstrating patience, the leadership avoided both prolonged insurgency and international intervention. The decision illustrates the fifth principle of state-formation realism: limited coercion to prevent systemic breakdown.

Negotiated Accessions: Consent as Strategy

While dramatic cases receive most historical attention, the majority of princely states integrated through negotiation. Rulers were offered guarantees: retention of titles, financial settlements, and ceremonial status within the new order. These concessions were not mere generosity; they were instruments of stability. By preserving honor and material security, resistance incentives were reduced. Local administrative networks continued functioning under new authority, lowering the cost of integration.

This pattern reveals realism operating through accommodation. Coercion remained implicit but rarely necessary because credible capability underpinned negotiation. Agreements converted potential adversaries into cooperative stakeholders. Rather than dismantling existing hierarchies abruptly, the strategy absorbed them, ensuring continuity of governance. The exchange — symbolic autonomy for political unity — produced durable compliance at minimal social cost.

Strategic Logic across Cases

Across these diverse situations, a consistent pattern emerges. First came persuasion and incentives; second, controlled pressure; third, limited force if unavoidable; and finally, rapid institutional integration. Each stage aimed to reduce long-term violence even if short-term compulsion proved necessary. The guiding calculation was preventive: early consolidation would avert larger conflicts later.

These cases demonstrate that realist statecraft during formation differs from traditional interstate realism. Victory was not measured by territorial gain or prestige but by the disappearance of alternative sovereignties. Success meant

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normal politics could begin — taxation, law enforcement, and constitutional governance replacing uncertainty. The integration of varied territories through differentiated methods therefore represented a coherent strategy shaped by prudence rather than improvisation.

Applied realist statecraft, in this context, was neither purely coercive nor purely consensual. It was calibrated. Each decision balanced legitimacy and authority, patience and urgency, negotiation and enforcement. Through this adaptive sequencing, political unity became operational reality, transforming legal independence into effective sovereignty.

6) Administrative Realism: Bureaucracy as Diplomacy

Political integration alone does not create a state. Agreements, accessions, and military stabilization can establish territorial jurisdiction, but sovereignty becomes meaningful only when authority penetrates everyday life through institutions. Courts must function, taxes must be collected, police must maintain order, and communication networks must operate seamlessly across regions. Without these administrative capacities, political unity remains declaratory rather than operational. The consolidation of India after independence therefore required more than diplomatic negotiation; it required the rapid construction of an administrative architecture capable of translating decisions into reality. This dimension may be termed administrative realism — the use of bureaucratic capacity as an instrument of strategic statecraft.

The preservation and strengthening of the civil services played a decisive role in this process. In the uncertain months following independence, many political leaders were skeptical of retaining colonial-era administrative structures, viewing them as relics of imperial control. Yet Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel recognized that dismantling them abruptly would create a vacuum. A state newly formed amid violence and displacement could not afford institutional experimentation at the cost of continuity. Instead, he advocated transforming the existing administrative machinery into a national service committed to constitutional governance.

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This decision reflected realist logic rather than bureaucratic conservatism. The ability to govern territory depends upon trained personnel capable of implementing policy across diverse regions. Revenue collection, refugee rehabilitation, food distribution, and maintenance of law and order required a disciplined administrative corps operating under unified authority. Without such capacity, integration agreements would have remained symbolic and local actors might have reverted to autonomous practices. Bureaucracy therefore functioned as the practical foundation of sovereignty.

Administrative realism also operated through uniformity of legal and fiscal systems. Princely states varied widely in governance practices — some maintained modern institutions, others relied on personalized authority. The challenge was not only to secure accession but to harmonize procedures without provoking resistance. Gradual absorption proved effective: local officials were incorporated into wider frameworks, existing regulations were standardized, and central oversight expanded incrementally. By minimizing abrupt disruption, the process preserved social stability while extending national authority.

Equally important was the role of administration in diplomacy. A state's credibility in international relations depends partly on its internal coherence. Foreign governments and institutions judge reliability through the capacity to honor commitments, regulate borders, and maintain predictable governance. Rapid administrative integration signaled durability to external observers. Even without formal strategic alliances, the demonstration of functional governance enhanced legitimacy. In this sense, bureaucracy acted as diplomatic communication: competence conveyed stability.

The linkage between administration and security further illustrates this principle. Law enforcement networks coordinated intelligence across regions, reducing the risk of insurgent sanctuaries emerging in recently integrated territories. Judicial institutions established predictable dispute resolution, lowering incentives for armed contestation. Fiscal integration enabled resource mobilization

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necessary for defense preparedness. Each administrative function therefore contributed indirectly to strategic security. Power did not arise solely from military strength but from the capacity to organize society.

Administrative realism also balanced central authority with regional participation. Incorporation of local elites into new institutions created shared ownership of governance. Rather than imposing entirely external rule, the system absorbed existing administrative knowledge. This approach reduced alienation and prevented the perception of conquest. The state expanded not by displacing society but by reorganizing it within a unified framework.

Crucially, the administrative project unfolded rapidly. Delay could have allowed parallel authorities to solidify, undermining national coherence. By establishing standardized procedures soon after accession, the government ensured that political decisions became everyday realities. Citizens encountered the state through courts, police stations, and revenue offices — tangible evidence that sovereignty existed beyond proclamations.

Administrative realism therefore complements military and diplomatic action. Negotiation secures agreement, force resolves resistance, but administration sustains order. The durability of integration depends less on dramatic moments of decision than on routine functioning afterward. Through institutional consolidation, authority becomes habitual, and habit produces legitimacy.

The broader implication is that statecraft extends beyond visible acts of leadership. The quiet work of administration constitutes a strategic resource equal to armies or treaties. A state capable of governing commands recognition and deters fragmentation because alternatives appear uncertain. By prioritizing bureaucratic continuity and expansion, the leadership transformed territorial acquisition into enduring sovereignty. The making of the state thus occurred as much in offices and records as in negotiations and campaigns. Administrative realism converted political unity into lived political order.

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7) Ethics and Responsibility

State formation inevitably raises moral questions. The consolidation of authority often requires decisions that affect autonomy, property, and sometimes life itself. Judged from a distance, the use of pressure or force can appear incompatible with democratic ideals. Yet evaluating such decisions requires attention to context: the moral landscape of political birth differs from that of stable governance. In moments of foundational uncertainty, leaders confront not a choice between coercion and freedom alone but between limited coercion and widespread disorder. The ethical reasoning guiding integration after independence therefore reflected responsibility under constraint.

For Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the central moral objective was the prevention of prolonged violence. Partition had demonstrated how quickly administrative collapse could produce mass suffering. The existence of multiple competing sovereignties within the subcontinent risked repeating such tragedy across numerous regions. Fragmentation would have encouraged armed rivalry among territories, disrupted economic networks, and endangered vulnerable populations. Under these conditions, inaction could be as harmful as excessive action. Responsibility required minimizing total harm rather than avoiding all compulsion.

This perspective aligns with a tradition of prudential ethics in political thought, most famously articulated by Max Weber as the "ethic of responsibility." Political actors, in this view, must consider consequences rather than intentions alone. Decisions are judged by their capacity to prevent greater destruction. The consolidation of authority thus becomes a moral obligation when its absence threatens widespread insecurity.

Negotiation formed the first ethical instrument. Most princely rulers were offered guarantees preserving dignity and financial stability. These concessions reduced humiliation and allowed voluntary accession, demonstrating respect for status while ensuring unity. Consent was preferred because it minimized coercion and facilitated long-term cooperation. The preservation of ceremonial privileges symbolized

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continuity rather than conquest, allowing political transition without social rupture.

However, ethical responsibility also required credible enforcement. Where negotiations failed and instability escalated, selective force was employed. The guiding principle was proportionality: action limited to restoring order and followed by normalization. The objective was not punishment but stabilization. Rapid administrative integration after intervention prevented cycles of retaliation, reducing overall violence compared to prolonged conflict.

Critics sometimes interpret such measures solely through the lens of centralization, arguing that they constrained regional autonomy. Yet the alternative — a landscape of fragmented sovereignties — may have undermined individual liberty more severely. Rights depend upon institutions capable of enforcement. Without unified authority, protections against exploitation or communal violence become uncertain. Stability, therefore, functions as a precondition for freedom rather than its negation.

Ethical evaluation must also consider temporal horizons. Immediate non-interference might preserve formal autonomy but generate long-term insecurity. Conversely, limited short-term coercion may enable durable peace. Responsibility lies in choosing the path that reduces cumulative harm across time. This calculus does not eliminate moral tension but frames it as tragic necessity rather than moral indifference.

Importantly, the leadership did not justify force through ideological absolutism. Actions were framed as exceptional responses to exceptional circumstances. Once integration was secured, constitutional processes expanded democratic participation and regional representation. Coercive measures were transitional, not permanent governance methods. The restoration of normal politics marked the ethical endpoint of consolidation.

Ethics and realism therefore intersect rather than conflict. Realism acknowledges constraints imposed by uncertainty; ethics guides how power operates within those constraints. A purely idealist approach might reject all coercion yet risk greater suffering through instability. A purely instrumental

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approach might impose order without regard to legitimacy. The integration strategy attempted a middle path: persuasion where possible, force where necessary, and institutionalization afterward.

This balance reflects a conception of moral leadership grounded in responsibility to the entire political community. The aim was neither domination nor ideological purity but the creation of conditions in which ordinary citizens could live without fear of recurring conflict. Political unity, in this sense, became a moral good because it enabled rights, economic security, and democratic development.

The ethical legacy of integration thus lies not in the absence of coercion but in its restraint and purpose. Decisions were taken within a tragic context where all options carried costs. Responsibility required selecting the course that preserved the greatest possibility of future peace. Stability became the bridge between necessity and justice, linking realist prudence with moral aspiration.

8) Comparative Perspective in Global History

The consolidation of India after independence can be better understood when situated within a broader comparative framework of twentieth-century state formation. Decolonization across Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe produced political entities that possessed juridical sovereignty but often lacked administrative cohesion or territorial certainty. Some succeeded in consolidating authority rapidly; others descended into fragmentation, military coups, or prolonged civil war. A comparative lens reveals that the integration of India was neither inevitable nor merely domestic — it represented a distinctive trajectory within a global pattern of post-imperial transition.

In many postcolonial settings, the withdrawal of empire left behind weak institutional linkages among regions. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, colonial boundaries enclosed diverse political communities without creating strong central administrative capacity. Following independence, several states struggled to maintain territorial authority, and internal fragmentation often escalated into conflict. Similarly, in

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Southeast Asia, contested sovereignty and regional insurgencies marked the early decades of independence. These cases illustrate how sovereignty without effective consolidation can produce cycles of instability.

The European historical experience also offers instructive parallels. The unification of Italy under Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour and the consolidation of Germany under Otto von Bismarck involved strategic combinations of diplomacy, limited war, and institutional absorption. Yet these processes occurred within a context of pre-existing state traditions and relatively cohesive administrative cultures. Moreover, European unifications unfolded over longer time horizons, allowing gradual consolidation. In contrast, postcolonial state formation operated under compressed timelines and the scrutiny of an emerging international order structured by the United Nations and Cold War rivalry.

The Middle Eastern experience following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire provides another point of comparison. Mandate territories often inherited artificial borders and fragmented authority structures. In several cases, centralized authority was established through coercive means but lacked durable legitimacy, producing recurring instability. The contrast underscores the importance of balancing coercion with institutional integration and negotiated accommodation — elements that characterized India's approach.

The case of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is distinctive because consolidation occurred rapidly yet without prolonged internal warfare on a national scale. While localized conflicts emerged, the overall integration of more than 500 princely states into a functioning federal framework within a few years stands out comparatively. This outcome cannot be explained solely by geographic size or nationalist sentiment. Other newly independent countries possessed strong anti-colonial mobilization yet experienced fragmentation. The Indian case suggests that strategic sequencing — negotiation first, credible coercion second, and immediate institutional absorption third — contributed significantly to durability.

Another comparative insight concerns the relationship between centralization and federalism. In several postcolonial

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states, excessive centralization generated resistance and separatist movements, while excessive decentralization weakened coherence. India adopted a federal constitutional structure that recognized regional diversity yet maintained a strong center during the initial consolidation phase. This balance mitigated centrifugal pressures while preserving democratic legitimacy. Comparative cases where federal frameworks were absent or weak often faced more severe instability.

The temporal dimension also matters. Some states delayed integration decisions, allowing regional authorities to entrench themselves. In contrast, rapid action in the immediate aftermath of independence reduced uncertainty and discouraged competing sovereignties from solidifying. Speed functioned as strategy. By closing the window for fragmentation, consolidation reduced the likelihood of protracted conflict.

International context further differentiates the Indian trajectory. The early Cold War environment incentivized alignment and external influence in many new states. Fragmented territories were susceptible to proxy intervention. Swift consolidation limited such vulnerabilities. Effective internal authority strengthened external autonomy, allowing foreign policy choices without dependence on external guarantors.

Comparatively, then, the Indian experience illustrates a model of postcolonial state formation characterized by calibrated coercion, institutional continuity, negotiated accommodation, and rapid administrative integration. It avoided the extremes of violent revolutionary unification and passive fragmentation. The lesson from global history is not that integration is universally replicable but that state formation under uncertainty benefits from strategic clarity and sequencing.

Placing this case within comparative perspective also corrects a common bias in international relations scholarship, which often privileges European historical experiences as paradigmatic. Postcolonial state formation represents a distinct yet theoretically rich arena of political development. By examining integration alongside other global examples, it

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becomes clear that the making of a viable state is neither automatic nor purely domestic; it is a strategic endeavor shaped by timing, institutional inheritance, and leadership choices.

The comparative view thus reinforces the argument that consolidation in India was not simply administrative success but a historically significant instance of survival-oriented statecraft within a turbulent global era.

9) Implications for International Relations Theory

The consolidation of India in the late 1940s carries implications that extend beyond national history into the conceptual foundations of International Relations (IR) theory. Most IR scholarship begins with the assumption that states already exist as coherent actors. Whether in realist, liberal, or constructivist traditions, the state is treated as the basic unit of analysis, while the process by which political authority becomes sufficiently unified to act internationally is rarely examined. The experience of early post-independence integration challenges this assumption by foregrounding a prior analytical question: how political communities become actors in the first place. Incorporating this stage broadens the scope of IR from a theory of interaction among states to a theory that also explains the creation of states.

Traditional realism, associated with Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, emphasizes survival and power competition under anarchy. Yet both classical and structural realism implicitly presume internally consolidated political units capable of calculating interests and mobilizing resources. The integration experience demonstrates that survival concerns arise earlier: fragmentation within borders can be as dangerous as threats beyond them. The elimination of internal rival sovereignties therefore becomes a form of security strategy. Realism must expand to include this foundational stage in which domestic consolidation constitutes the first act of survival in an anarchic environment. A state does not merely protect itself from external enemies; it first prevents its own political disintegration.

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This perspective blurs the conventional separation between domestic and international politics. Integration decisions were formally internal matters, yet they carried immediate external consequences. Territorial ambiguity risked diplomatic disputes and external intervention, while rapid consolidation strengthened credibility and autonomy abroad. State formation and foreign policy thus appear mutually constitutive rather than sequential. A government unable to exercise authority internally cannot reliably commit externally. The international system interacts not only with the behavior of states but with the degree of their internal coherence.

The case also reshapes debates about power. Realist analysis traditionally privileges military capability and economic resources, and liberal institutionalism emphasizes cooperation through international regimes. The consolidation experience highlights administrative capacity as an equally fundamental dimension of power. Taxation systems, policing networks, judicial authority, and communication infrastructure enable governments to implement decisions and maintain order. These capacities transform nominal sovereignty into effective agency. International bargaining strength depends not only on armies and alliances but on the ability to govern territory predictably. Domestic institutional robustness therefore becomes a precondition for credible international participation.

Constructivist insights regarding legitimacy and identity further illuminate the process. Integration did not rely solely on coercion; negotiated accommodation and symbolic recognition of regional status reduced resistance and stabilized authority. Acceptance by local elites and populations lowered enforcement costs and strengthened durability. Legitimacy functioned as a strategic resource rather than merely a moral aspiration. Material capability ensured compliance, but normative acceptance ensured endurance. State formation thus emerges as a joint product of coercive capacity and shared political meaning.

The role of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel challenges conventional role distinctions within IR theory. Leaders responsible for

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internal administration are often analytically separated from those conducting foreign policy. Yet consolidation decisions determined the future scope of diplomatic autonomy. By creating a territorially coherent and administratively capable state, the leadership expanded the range of foreign policy choices available to later governments. External independence emerged as a consequence of internal stability; the formation of the actor preceded its strategy.

The experience also informs debates about sequencing in political development. Theories frequently ask whether democracy or state capacity should emerge first. The integration process suggests that minimal unity is necessary for democratic institutions to function effectively, without a functioning authority structure, political competition risks degenerating into factional conflict. State formation therefore underpins both domestic democratic order and meaningful international participation.

Finally, incorporating this stage into IR broadens the discipline's historical and geographical scope. Much canonical theory derives from European experience, where centralized states preceded modern diplomatic systems. Twentieth-century decolonization reveals that sovereignty construction continued within the international order itself. Recognizing this dimension prevents postcolonial cases from appearing anomalous and instead positions them as theoretically informative. The emergence of actors becomes part of the dynamics of the system rather than its precondition.

In sum, the integration of India demonstrates that international politics begins not only with relations among states but with the construction of states. Realism expands to include internal consolidation as survival strategy, liberalism recognizes domestic institutional capacity as the foundation of cooperation, and constructivism highlights legitimacy as strategic resource. The state appears not as an assumed entity but as an achievement — one produced through deliberate strategies transforming legal independence into operational sovereignty.

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10) Conclusion: The Architecture of Political Survival

The consolidation of India after independence illustrates a fundamental dimension of political life: survival precedes strategy. A state cannot pursue prosperity, diplomacy, or ideological vision unless it first secures its own existence. The formative years following 1947 presented conditions in which independence alone did not guarantee viability. Fragmented territories, administrative discontinuity, and widespread insecurity threatened to convert formal sovereignty into temporary aspiration. The challenge lay not in managing relations among established powers but in ensuring that a coherent political community would endure.

The preceding analysis has interpreted this process through the concept of state-formation realism. Rather than viewing integration as administrative routine or nationalist inevitability, it emerges as a sequence of strategic decisions aimed at preventing disintegration. Negotiation preserved legitimacy, calibrated coercion deterred defiance, and institutional consolidation transformed agreements into functioning authority. Each element contributed to a single objective: the creation of a durable state capable of sustaining political order.

Central to this achievement was the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whose approach combined prudence with decisiveness. His statecraft neither rejected moral considerations nor subordinated them to abstract idealism. Instead, it reflected responsibility under constraint. The prevention of widespread violence and recurring instability guided choices that balanced persuasion and force. Unity was pursued not for symbolic prestige but as the precondition for democratic life and social stability.

The integration of diverse territories demonstrates that political order is constructed through layered processes. Territorial accession created jurisdiction, administrative integration created functionality, and constitutional development created legitimacy. None alone would have sufficed. Without accession, the state lacked boundaries; without administration, it lacked capacity; without legitimacy, it lacked acceptance. Survival required all three operating

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together. This layered structure constitutes the architecture of political survival.

The broader significance of this experience lies in its theoretical implications. International relations scholarship often begins with established actors interacting within an anarchic system. The Indian case shows that actors themselves are products of strategic action. Sovereignty is not merely declared; it is organized. By recognizing this stage, political analysis gains historical depth. The behavior of states cannot be fully understood without understanding how they became states capable of behavior.

The architecture also underscores the relationship between stability and freedom. Durable institutions enable rights to be meaningful. In the absence of authority, liberty becomes vulnerable to coercion by competing groups. Consolidation therefore functioned not as suppression of diversity but as the framework within which diversity could be expressed without violence. Political unity provided the conditions for constitutional governance rather than its negation.

Comparatively, the case highlights that post-imperial transitions need not culminate in prolonged conflict if consolidation is pursued through balanced strategy. The combination of accommodation, credible enforcement, and rapid institutionalization minimized cycles of resistance. The objective was not domination but normalization — the transition from extraordinary measures to ordinary politics. Once achieved, routine governance replaced crisis management.

Ultimately, the creation of a viable state represents the most profound success of political leadership because it shapes possibilities for generations beyond its founding moment. Foreign policy choices, economic development, and democratic participation all depend on the existence of stable authority. The integration process therefore cannot be confined to national history alone; it represents a foundational episode in the global story of how political communities survive their most vulnerable period.

The architecture of political survival, as revealed here, rests on sequencing: first unity, then governance, then competition

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and cooperation with others. By transforming uncertain independence into functioning sovereignty, the leadership enabled subsequent decades of political evolution. The lesson is not that conflict disappears, but that it occurs within institutions rather than outside them.

In this sense, the consolidation of India demonstrates the earliest expression of realism — the recognition that order must exist before power can be exercised. A state's first victory is not over an external adversary but over the possibility of its own absence.

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