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Political Clearance for Foreign Visits in India: Rules, Institutional Framework, Federal Issues and Recent Controversy Explained

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Recent Developments:

- **Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy** had to cancel the **United States leg** of his 10-day United Kingdom–United States tour after the **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** denied political clearance for the proposed US programme.
- The **United Kingdom visit was cleared**, but the proposed US programme was not considered appropriate to the office held and the stated purpose of the visit, according to the MEA. Reddy consequently returned to Hyderabad from London instead of proceeding to Boston.
- The episode has renewed debate over the **scope, transparency, timing and federal implications** of the political-clearance mechanism for foreign visits by elected representatives.

Political Clearance: Meaning and Purpose:

What Is Political Clearance?

- **Political clearance** is an approval granted by the **Ministry of External Affairs** for specified foreign visits by government functionaries and other public representatives.
- The mechanism enables the Union Government to assess whether a proposed foreign engagement is compatible with **India's foreign-policy interests, diplomatic sensitivities and the position held by the visiting dignitary**.
- The MEA assesses the proposed programme of **Chief Ministers and other dignitaries** before granting political clearance, and the programme is expected to be appropriate to the office held and the stated purpose of the visit.
- The assessment can consider factors such as the **nature of the event, level of participation, proposed meetings, invitation, purpose of travel and India's diplomatic relationship with the host country**.
- Political clearance therefore acts as a **diplomatic and institutional screening mechanism**, rather than merely being a travel-permission procedure.

Institutional Mechanism:

- The MEA processes political-clearance applications through an institutional mechanism designed to coordinate foreign engagements of officials from the **Central and State Governments**.
- The online **e-Political Clearance portal** was introduced to facilitate applications, generate acknowledgement and reference numbers, route applications to the concerned MEA divisions and communicate the final clearance electronically.
- The digital system is intended to improve **administrative efficiency, traceability and coordination** in processing foreign-visit proposals.

Foreign Travel Requirements for Chief Ministers and State Ministers:

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Mandatory Clearances:

- Under the **Cabinet Secretariat's 6 May 2015 instructions**, the Cabinet Secretariat and MEA must be kept informed about proposed foreign visits, whether official or private, by **Chief Ministers and Ministers of State Governments and Union Territories**.
- **Prior political clearance and Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) clearance** are mandatory for such visits.
- In the case of Chief Ministers and State Ministers, a copy of the application is also required to be sent to the **Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs (DEA)**.
- The requirement demonstrates that foreign travel by State-level constitutional and political executives can have implications extending beyond the State's administrative domain.

Why Is Union-Level Clearance Required?

- **Foreign affairs** fall within the Union's domain under the constitutional distribution of legislative powers, while States may nevertheless engage internationally for legitimate purposes such as **investment promotion, education, technology and cultural cooperation**.
- The clearance mechanism attempts to reconcile State-level international engagement with the Union Government's responsibility for maintaining a **coherent national foreign policy**.
- It also seeks to prevent foreign engagements by individual States from creating **diplomatic commitments, conflicting messages or protocol complications** for India as a whole.

Clearance Requirements for Other Officials:

Union Ministers and Members of Parliament:

- **Union Ministers** require political clearance from the MEA as well as approval from the **Prime Minister** for foreign visits according to the applicable government procedures.
- **Lok Sabha Members of Parliament** require clearance from the **Speaker**, while **Rajya Sabha Members** require clearance from the **Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha** for applicable foreign engagements.
- Private foreign travel by Members of Parliament has a different procedural framework from official government travel and does not necessarily require the same level of institutional approval.

Government Officials:

- Foreign visits by government officials can require approval at different administrative levels depending upon the **rank of the officer, nature and duration of the visit, size of delegation and source of funding**.
- Proposals involving higher-level officers or specified categories of foreign travel may require approval of the **Screening Committee of Secretaries (SCoS)**.
- Government instructions provide that proposals requiring SCoS approval should generally reach the Department of Expenditure **15 days before departure and not later than 5 days before departure**, failing which the proposal may be rejected.
- The framework is intended to ensure that foreign travel is subject to **financial scrutiny, administrative necessity and institutional accountability**.

Foreign Hospitality and FCRA:

- Where foreign hospitality is involved, additional scrutiny under the **Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010** may become relevant.
- The FCRA framework seeks to regulate the acceptance and utilisation of **foreign contributions and foreign hospitality** in order to protect transparency and prevent inappropriate external influence.

- Political clearance and FCRA clearance therefore address different concerns, with the former primarily concerning **foreign-policy and diplomatic considerations** and the latter concerning **foreign financial or hospitality-related regulation**.

Political Clearance and Centre–State Relations:

Constitutional Dimension:

- The issue involves an important balance between **cooperative federalism** and the Union Government's exclusive responsibility for foreign affairs.
- The **Seventh Schedule of the Constitution** places foreign affairs, diplomatic relations and related matters within the Union sphere.
- States cannot independently conduct foreign policy in the constitutional sense, but State governments increasingly participate in **subnational diplomacy**, especially for investment, technology, education and trade promotion.
- Political clearance provides a mechanism through which such State-level international engagement can remain consistent with **India's overall diplomatic position**.

Subnational Diplomacy:

- State governments increasingly undertake international outreach to attract **foreign direct investment, technology, educational partnerships, tourism and industrial cooperation**.
- Such engagement can strengthen India's economic diplomacy by using the specialised strengths of individual States.
- However, foreign engagements involving foreign governments, political leaders or sensitive institutions can create **diplomatic and protocol implications** beyond the State's immediate economic objectives.
- The challenge is therefore to facilitate legitimate **subnational international engagement** without creating parallel or contradictory foreign-policy channels.

Previous Instances of Clearance Denial or Delay:

Arvind Kejriwal's Foreign Visits:

- In **2022**, then Delhi Chief Minister **Arvind Kejriwal** could not attend the **World Cities Summit in Singapore** after the required political clearance was not granted in time.
- In **2019**, Kejriwal was also unable to attend another international conference physically after approval was not granted, and he subsequently participated through **videoconferencing**.
- These episodes generated debate over whether the clearance system can unnecessarily restrict legitimate international engagement by elected State-level representatives.

Earlier Cases:

- During the **United Progressive Alliance era**, political clearance was reportedly denied for proposed foreign visits by **Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi** to the United States and Israel on procedural and protocol-related grounds.
- **Jharkhand Chief Minister Arjun Munda** also faced denial of clearance for a proposed visit to Thailand.
- Such precedents indicate that the mechanism has existed across different political administrations and is therefore not exclusively associated with the present government.

Debate Over the Clearance System:

Arguments in Favour:

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- Political clearance protects **diplomatic coherence** by ensuring that foreign engagements by Indian officials remain consistent with national foreign-policy objectives.
- It enables the MEA to assess whether proposed meetings or events could create **protocol, security, diplomatic or reputational concerns**.
- Central scrutiny becomes particularly relevant when State-level representatives plan meetings with **foreign political authorities, sensitive institutions or organisations with political affiliations**.
- The system can prevent individual foreign engagements from being interpreted as representing an official position of the Government of India without appropriate authorisation.

Concerns and Criticism:

- Critics argue that excessive discretion can create **delays, uncertainty and lack of transparency**, particularly when elected representatives have legitimate economic or educational objectives.
- Delayed decisions can make carefully planned foreign engagements ineffective because **international conferences, investment meetings and academic events operate on fixed schedules**.
- The absence of detailed publicly stated reasons for some decisions can create perceptions of **political discrimination or arbitrariness**.
- Excessive centralisation may also discourage States from pursuing legitimate forms of **economic and developmental diplomacy**.

Administrative Reform:

- The clearance mechanism should balance **diplomatic sensitivity with administrative predictability**.
- Clear timelines, transparent criteria, digital tracking and reasoned communication can reduce unnecessary disputes.
- A distinction could be maintained between **routine economic, educational and cultural engagements** and visits involving sensitive political or diplomatic interactions.
- Greater institutional consultation between the **MEA, Cabinet Secretariat and State Governments** can strengthen cooperative federalism while preserving the Union's constitutional role in foreign affairs.

Way Forward:

- The Government should establish **clear, objective and publicly accessible criteria** for political clearance while retaining flexibility for genuinely sensitive diplomatic matters.
- Applications should be processed within defined timelines so that elected representatives do not lose opportunities because of **administrative delay**.
- The digital clearance mechanism should provide applicants with **real-time status tracking and clearly communicated reasons for rejection or deferment**, subject to legitimate confidentiality requirements.
- Routine visits focused on **investment, education, science, technology and cultural cooperation** could receive streamlined processing where no significant diplomatic sensitivity is involved.

Conclusion:

- **Political clearance** is an important institutional mechanism through which India safeguards diplomatic coherence when government functionaries undertake foreign engagements.
- The recent **Revanth Reddy episode** highlights the continuing tension between the Union's responsibility for foreign affairs and States' growing interest in international economic and developmental engagement.
- The objective should not be to eliminate scrutiny but to make the system **transparent, predictable, timely and proportionate**.
- A reformed framework can protect India's diplomatic interests while simultaneously enabling States, elected representatives and public institutions to pursue legitimate **global partnerships for investment, education, technology and development**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Pointers:

- **Political clearance authority: Ministry of External Affairs.**
- **Chief Ministers and State Ministers:** Prior **political clearance and FCRA clearance** are mandatory under the applicable Cabinet Secretariat instructions.
- **State-level foreign visits:** The **Cabinet Secretariat and MEA** must be kept informed about proposed official or private foreign visits of Chief Ministers and State/Union Territory Ministers.
- **SCoS:** The **Screening Committee of Secretaries** examines specified categories of foreign-visit proposals.
- **Timeline for SCoS proposals:** Generally **15 days before departure**, and not later than **5 days before departure**.
- **Online system:** The MEA's **e-Political Clearance portal** facilitates online applications and processing.
- **Constitutional basis:** **Foreign affairs** are primarily a Union subject under the constitutional distribution of powers