NatStrat
Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

The Use of NGOs for Espionage and Propaganda

Author: Dr. Prem Mahadevan

GEOPOLITICS | SECURITY | TECHNOLOGY & ECONOMY

November 2026

NatStrat

Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues under the aegis of the Foundation for Pluralistic Research and Empowerment, a company incorporated and registered under Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013, India.

Follow Us On:

NatStrat | natstrat_org | natstrat_org |

natstrat_official | natstrat.official | NatStrat |

www.natstrat.org

Table Of Contents

ABSTRACT **1**

INTRODUCTION **2**

PART I
CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE **4**

Part II
OVERLAP BETWEEN NGOS AND SPY AGENCIES **14**

PART III
REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES: OVERLAP BETWEEN NGO AND INTELLIGENCE WORK **18**

PART IV
INDIA IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF FOREIGN PROPAGANDISTS **26**

CONCLUSION **28**

ABSTRACT

In his paper, *The Use of NGOs for Espionage and Propaganda*, Dr. Prem Mahadevan, from conceptual and real-world perspectives, analyses how the activities of certain foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly those funded by Western governments, may intersect with the interests and operations of foreign intelligence agencies that could raise national security concerns for host countries. Through historical and contemporary case studies spanning Europe, Russia, the United States and Asia, the author highlights how NGOs can serve as instruments for intelligence gathering, operational cover, access to influential networks and strategic narrative-building. The author highlights how foreign funding, transnational networks, and advocacy-driven activities of these NGOs could create avenues for covert influence and geopolitical leverage. It further examines how seemingly independent research, fieldwork and civil society initiatives can be exploited to advance the strategic interests of other countries. With particular emphasis on India, the paper identifies potential vulnerabilities arising from foreign NGOs operating in sensitive regions and engaging in politically consequential activities. It finally recommends enhanced scrutiny, transparency, and accountability for the operations of foreign-funded NGOs in safeguarding India's sovereignty and national security.

[The article is exclusive to NatStrat. The views expressed by the author(s) are personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.]

INTRODUCTION



Source: Generated using ChatGPT

In June 2026, Chinese authorities arrested an American scholar based in Thailand on espionage charges. He headed a think tank studying Myanmar, his country of origin, and had previously participated in the country's pro-democracy movement before researching Myanmar–China relations. Three months earlier, Indian authorities had arrested another American national and six Ukrainians for allegedly crossing the India–Myanmar border to train insurgent groups in Myanmar. Quoting the Chief Minister of Mizoram, an Indian news report stated that "nearly 2,000 foreigners visited Mizoram between June and December 2024, and many of them did not come as tourists and left the state unnoticed. He [the Mizoram Chief Minister] alleged some foreigners crossed the Indo-Myanmar border and entered Chin Hills in the neighbouring country to give military training there."

The American national arrested in India was the founder of a Washington DC-based consultancy that reportedly claimed to provide "free security consulting and training services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorist and insurgent groups." In other words, a non-profit organisation with a taste for foreign interventions.

Together, these two cases concern Myanmar and American interests there. They suggest a link between policy think-tanking and private consultancy, on the one hand, and espionage and paramilitary operations, on the other. At a time when the United States and some of its

Western allies are insecure about their power in the face of a resurgent Russia, an assertive China, and Iran, more efforts will likely be made to shape conflict trajectories and narratives to the detriment of some countries.

India, in particular, owing to its strategic location, has to be alert to propaganda tactics used by rogue Western news media organisations and especially rogue non-governmental organisations. The latter have long been objects of suspicion in developing countries. Their involvement in public activism, culture of entitlement when flouting local laws (such as restrictions on the movement of foreign nationals near sensitive border regions), and dubious sources of funding can, in some cases, make them useful instruments for stoking rebellion against the state, or at the very least, for gathering intelligence.

This essay analyses certain aspects of transnational civil society activism with potential security concerns for India. It argues that non-state entities receiving donations from foreign governments, especially advanced Western countries, to collect data and compile reports on developing countries might, knowingly or unknowingly, serve as tools to exert leverage over those countries. This essay identifies at least four ways in which these NGOs may support foreign intelligence agencies.

The essay is divided into four parts.

The first and second parts provide a conceptual outline and characteristics of the overlap between NGOs' and spy agencies' activities. It is based on the author's personal reflections, drawn from ten years of working in security policy analysis of transnational threats and another seven years in the Western NGO sector. The third part consists of real-world examples of how advocacy-oriented NGOs and, in some cases, even aid-providing NGOs can be compromised by foreign spy agencies. The fourth and final part alarms how India finds itself in the crosshairs of foreign propagandists. It concludes with the measures that India must take to protect its sovereignty and national security.

PART I

CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE

The author does not assert that all NGOs are instruments of neo-colonialism. Rather, some facets of their work are very much used to accentuate power disparities between developed and developing nations.

Each NGO in a developing country needs to be studied on a case-by-case basis by security analysts specialising in counterintelligence. Some might have no motive other than to advance the public good in conformity with local laws. Others, particularly those with a distinctly Western funding base, a geographically dispersed structure and a networked manner of operations, might be discreetly manipulated by one or several foreign spy agencies. Such NGOs can be used to undermine the credibility of targeted governments through civic activism.

Importantly, the vast majority of staff in a 'compromised' NGO would remain aware that their activities are guided by spymasters. Only the topmost level of management would maintain relations with intelligence-linked entities. Institutional reputations by laundering money through multiple layers of proxies such as grant-awarding foundations, foreign ministry NGO liaison offices and wealthy private donors, by converting it into charitable donations, ascribing such largesse to other government departments (those not engaged in intelligence work) or private philanthropists.

India wants to work with the West, but past abuses of trust make it naturally cautious. As India grows as an independent global power, the West may feel uneasy. Because of this, it is smart for India to map out the risks of foreign groups influencing its society. True sovereignty means keeping independent thought, which foreign activism sometimes tries to change. Indian security experts already know about NGOs linked to foreign spy agencies. However, this essay serves as a helpful risk-check for ordinary citizens in academia, journalism, or aid work who partner with Western groups.

Arbiters of Destiny in a Developing World? The 1990s

The glory era for civil society activism was the 1990s. As non-Western nations rushed to embrace democracy and free-market capitalism, one political orthodoxy dominated: that modernisation required westernisation. Since the 1980s Reagan-Thatcher partnership, the United States and United Kingdom had set the tone for what future models of economic, social, political, and cultural development would look like.

The state's role in welfare provision was to be minimised. International development loans were to be conditional on governments implementing structural adjustment programs that cut back on public expenditure. Instead of state bureaucracies, non-governmental actors

would provide basic services. The stage was set for an export of technical experts from the West to the developing world, much as during colonialism. The only difference was that this time the incoming experts sought permission to enter.

More than the Russosphere, the Sinosphere or the Indosphere, it was the US-UK partnership that dominated the international NGO sector. Together with select European partners, they monopolised the right to decide what was progressive and what was retrogressive regarding another sovereign country's economic and political pathway. Previously, the Soviet Union had attempted to match the West in its developmental outreach to non-aligned countries.

However, during the 1990s, economic challenges in Russia meant that Anglo-American primacy in societal re-engineering worldwide went unchallenged. There was no longer a 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' World, but a schism between the countries that made rules and those that had to accept rules. A binary divide was created between the Global North and the Global South, and then the non-governmental sector became a tool for 'soft power' projection across the divide.

NGOs and Narrative Building: Post-Russia-Ukraine War

With the resurgence of great-power tensions, most notably since the Russia-Ukraine War began on 24 February 2022, the West has grown anxious about aligning the foreign policies of non-Western states with its own geopolitical objectives. NGOs, particularly those involved in advocacy work, are seen as effective platforms for exerting indirect pressure on developing countries to achieve such alignment because of their focus on narrative formation.

These NGOs can praise, criticise, or condemn governments based on transnational concerns such as human rights, environmental protection, and anti-corruption. Even if their commentary is ignored by policymakers, it can be amplified by other NGOs and fed into analytical frameworks used by the news media and government policy experts.

Since the war in Eastern Europe broke out, a 'Western-first' mindset seems to have developed among some previously neutral international NGO managers. Even as they espouse global humanitarian rhetoric, they adopt institutional positions designed to please their donors in the Euro-Atlantic strategic community. Such positions are then imposed on non-Western subordinates through gag orders ("Do not post on social media about contentious political issues") and the release of institutional publications that have an anti-Russian orientation.

Commonalities between Spyworld and NGOs

The spy world and the NGO world, to some extent, overlap with each other. Top-level players in both worlds are driven by a sense of mission that combines positive and negative qualities. Spymasters (those who actually plan and control intelligence operations) are driven by a

mixture of their own patriotism and cynicism about others' truthfulness. NGO managers are driven by a combination of humanism and a cynical understanding of the need to secure funding.

Both spymasters and NGO managers manipulate the naivete of those lower down in the hierarchy to prompt them to take risks. In the NGO world, for example, it is not unknown for junior personnel to be blackmailed with the threat of dismissal if they baulk at activities that might be technically illegal (such as conducting field research while travelling on a tourist visa) or outright dangerous (such as visiting a conflict zone). Both professions, espionage and NGO activism, are characterised by a heavy dose of opportunism, especially with regard to foreign laws.

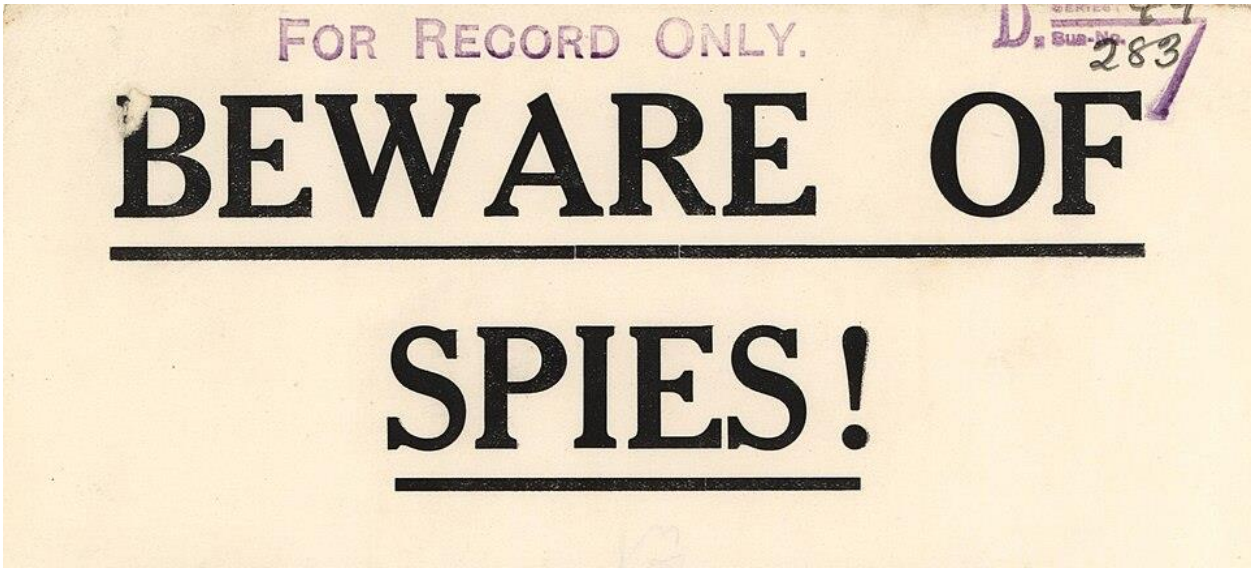
The essay suggests that a crusading spirit among some Western NGOs operates in developing countries to champion the geopolitical interests of the Global North. They do so as much out of financial necessity as ideological conviction. Today, the NGOs find it difficult to be politically neutral. Those that survive depend more than ever on taxpayer money funnelled through government grants and wealthy private sector donors. Diversifying through crowdfunding is an option, but it works better for entities engaged in service provision. Organisations focused on awareness-raising and knowledge-sharing are less likely to receive funding from small-scale donors. Such activities have long gestation periods. For small donors, it is more emotionally rewarding when their contributions have an immediate, local impact, rather than being part of a lengthy capacity-building process in some distant country.

As a general rule, the larger the NGO, the better placed it is to receive government money, and the more subservient it will be to government agendas.

Why should Some NGOs be Viewed with Caution?

There are two broad types of NGOs: those that provide services to local communities and those focused on raising awareness of a particular issue within a community. They are called 'operational NGOs' and 'advocacy NGOs ', respectively. The two roles are not mutually exclusive. An advocacy NGO can also be called a 'civil society organisation' (CSO).

One view considers CSOs to be an NGO sub-category that aims to influence policy. Unlike operational NGOs, which provide healthcare, drinking water, or other tangible benefits while staying away from political controversies, advocacy NGOs focus heavily on knowledge campaigns. They fixate on an issue and plant their organisation's flag within a wider spectrum of views concerning this issue. They then seek to connect with others who might share their views.



'Beware of Spies' by Archives New Zealand. Source: Wikimedia Commons

NGOs are commonly seen as acting independently of state control, especially in terms of appointments. Even if recommendations from government officials play a role in certain staffing appointments, there is at least an effort to indicate functional separation from state objectives. This is important for credibility. For example, the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which received sizable donations from the United States government, was criticised for these donations slanting the agenda of OCCRP towards investigating criminal activity in countries that had hostile relations with the US. Although the organisation denied this, its dependence on American funding was so heavy that, when Washington slashed support in 2025, OCCRP laid off 20% of its staff.

Certain research subjects, such as 'smuggling', 'trade corridors', or 'supply chain security', have the potential to be misused as cover for discreet probes of a targeted country's security systems and macroeconomic health. For this to happen, desk-based analysis of data culled from published open sources needs to be accompanied by field reporting. Insights gained by direct observation and in-person conversations on the ground might not seem worthwhile at first, especially in an age where there is a surfeit of information available online.

However, verifying the authenticity of published material, especially in situations prone to changes that go unreported by mainstream media, requires ground-level data collection. Economic analysis, for example, is a discipline that relies overwhelmingly on open sources, but the informational yield from these sources can go stale unnoticed due to unchecked citations, even by reputable commentators. All it takes is for one respected author to provide a credible, eyeball-grabbing statistic, computed through a scientifically defensible methodology, and others become tempted to casually cite it long afterwards without bothering to verify whether it is up to date.

Meanwhile, spies-in-training are often taught to gather as much information as possible about the security apparatus of a foreign country they might one day be dispatched to operate in. Such information can extend from the highest federal counterespionage office to a local police station in a border village. By building up a detailed profile of the targeted country's security systems, if necessary, several years before operational use is made of such data, professional intelligence agencies can be prepared to hit the ground running if and when tasked by their political masters with carrying out a covert operation or building up a local informant network.

Resource-strapped developing countries seldom have the luxury of supporting such granular research by independent experts. But certain Western countries, which follow interventionist foreign policies and have the financial resources to bankroll fieldwork by university scholars, investigative journalists, and NGO activists, might find no shortage of willing marionettes, both among their own citizens and among foreigners, to gather descriptive intelligence on conditions abroad.

From Advocacy to Geopolitical Influence

Advocacy is an effort to influence the policy of a sovereign government, ostensibly in service of a wider social cause. In the decade that followed the end of the Cold War (1991-1999), influence campaigns such as democracy promotion in Eastern Europe and Central Asia might have seemed unthreatening to local elites. Following the 'Colour Revolutions' which took place in the former Soviet bloc between 2000 and 2005, this agenda took on a more subversive nature.

In the post-2022 international security environment, where geopolitical tensions between the West and autocratic states are rising fast, democracy promotion is no longer an innocent activity. Rather, it is a continuation of Cold War-era tactics of accomplishing regime change through incrementalism. It seeks to impose a distinctly 'Western' set of governing principles in regions where indigenous traditions do not strongly support them. It is ideological neo-colonialism.

Funding Shapes Organisational Priorities

Who funds NGOs and why they do so determines whether an NGO is a subversive threat. The extent of family-based connections between NGO staffers and privileged elites who shape policy in Western countries cannot be ignored. An American journalist observed:

"A global south without the need to rely on aid and charity would represent a huge financial loss for large numbers of well-heeled bureaucrats and their children, whose graduation from prestigious private schools guarantees them a track to employment. At the elite level, there is a startling lack of diversity. The networks that dominated in the colonial era still dominate today; the same names, the same families. Social mobility, which has percolated up in some professions, has not increased in the "public" and "non-profit" sectors. We can see the way in

which this feudal class has insulated itself through its own self-definition abroad with "NGO-only" bars and hotels and clubs."

Transnational NGOs and Jurisdictional Flexibility

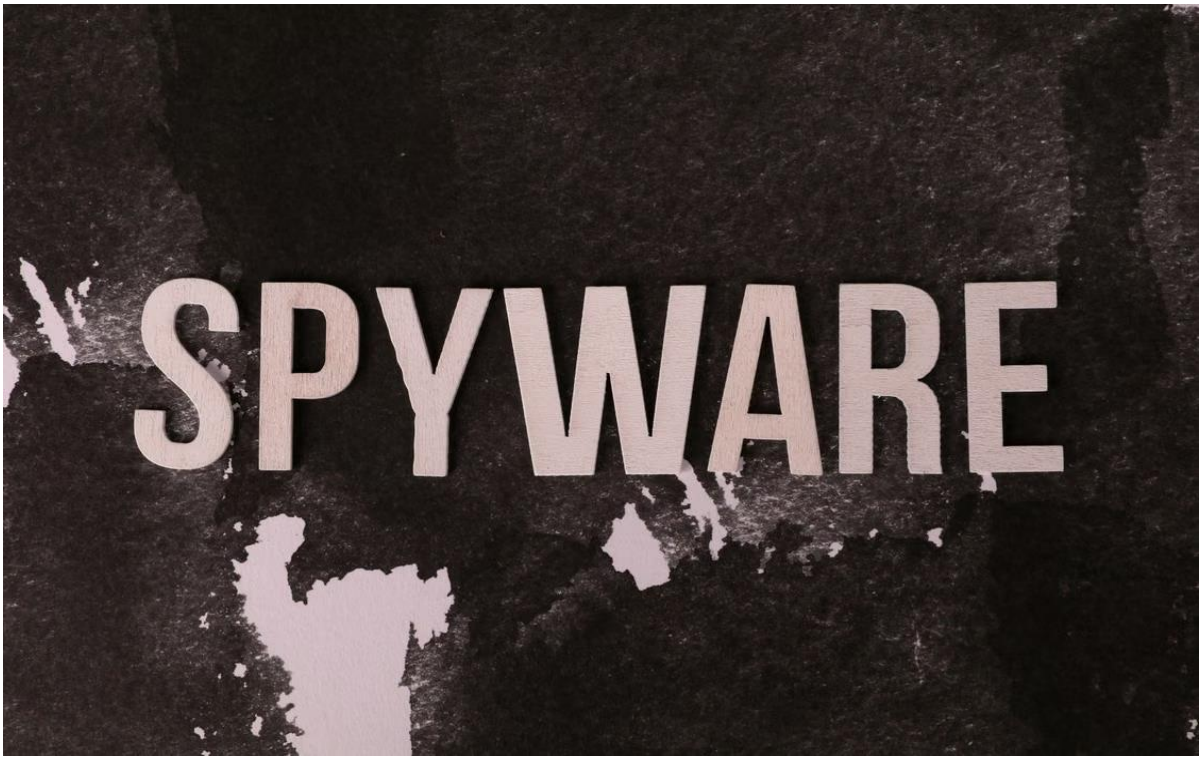
An NGO may be an entirely local or national-level entity, in which case its headquarters staff will likely take care to adhere to the letter of applicable laws within their relevant jurisdiction. However, an NGO with transnational operations and a substantial Western donor base is a different political creature: its cross-jurisdictional nature allows it, like a multinational firm, to cherry-pick which laws it observes.

What might be illegal in one national jurisdiction might be permissible in another, creating a temptation to administratively border-hop and thereby skirt around the applicable laws. This is particularly true of NGOs that are not only Western-funded but also predominantly Western-based, running only satellite offices in developing countries. Some such entities have sometimes been accused of a 'white saviour complex'.

Compartmentalisation and Institutional Plausible Deniability

Advocacy NGOs could well play a role that is both progressive and subversive, especially in conservative social contexts such as India. Funded by interventionist norm-based foreign policies of countries such as Norway, the US or the United Kingdom and registered in neutral states such as Austria or Switzerland, these entities could be 'false-flagged' as politically agnostic.

The organisation can practice knowledge compartmentalisation between employers and the local staff. Information about ongoing activities within high-risk areas and changing donor priorities can be shared on a need-to-know basis. Staff members who directly negotiate research contracts may become aware of the motivations of a particular project, but their colleagues, the field researchers and desk analysts, need not be. They merely need to gather and collate data as directed by project coordinators, but have no idea how the data will be used.



Ann Hannes. Source: Pexels

The Asia Foundation: A Historical Precedent

The Asia Foundation, founded in 1954, illustrates this dynamic. In 1953, the US government tasked the newly formed CIA to "overtly" oversee "private organizations" which would take on projects that would seem too much like propaganda were the US government to claim authorship." An existing organisation, the Committee for Free Asia, which had been created by the Office of Policy Coordination, the covert operations branch of the CIA, was renamed as the 'Asia Foundation' and registered as an NGO in California. The foundation was projected as being funded entirely by private donors. Until exposed in 1967 by American journalists, it received annual payments of 8.5 million US dollars from the CIA.

The Foundation had been operating offices in 13 Asian countries, employing a total of 400 staff. These included both Americans and locals from the host nations. Aware that Washington's sympathy for anti-communist European colonial regimes was unpopular in Asia, the CIA calculated that an American NGO that supposedly had no ties to the US policy establishment might be able to generate trust with Asian elites.

The Asia Foundation "contributed to intelligence gathering and covert operations in Asia. It was not just a conduit for CIA funds; it was an operational intelligence asset of enormous consequence". It promoted 'soft power' before the term even existed, by supporting film-makers, artists and musicians and sponsoring academic research about Asian countries.

Local employees were unaware of the CIA's control over the organisation, nor were Asian scholars, politicians and civil society activists who benefited from its largesse. Their contacts with the foundation were discreetly monitored by the spy agency to identify who might be further cultivated as intelligence assets. Decades later, a commentator drily observed that academic writers were often unaware of the value of the information they were sharing with foreigners: "One scholar's field research findings may be a CIA operative's actionable intelligence."

Academia and Intelligence networks

Writing in 2012, an American professor commented that

"The CIA's relationship with academia has gone much deeper in the last sixty years than merely sponsoring research that can help it analyse intelligence data. The Agency has not merely relied on the expertise of scholars on the countries and cultures it engages with. It has sponsored research and journals without publicly declaring its funding, and used academics to help produce disinformation and engage directly in activities related to spying. Moreover, in Southeast Asia (particularly in Vietnam during the war years), Latin America and Africa, research on "third world" development studies and techniques in counter-insurgency became staples of CIA-academic collaborations."

So pervasive is the influence of spy agencies in supposedly 'independent' scholarly research that, reportedly, even peer reviewers for academic publications can be influenced to share confidential information or give greater visibility to some research findings over others.



Source: Generated using ChatGPT

Espionage: Access to Information and Key Individuals

There is an old joke about a meeting between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Churchill sought to break the ice with light conversation about his favourite hobby, saying that he collected funny stories which people told about him. Stalin revealed that he had a similar hobby: he collected people who told funny stories about him.

The idea of 'collecting people' is integral to human intelligence (HUMINT, more commonly known as espionage). Foreign intelligence organisations, or 'spy agencies', collect people whose personal interests overlap with the organisational goal of breaching another country's secrecy regime. In the spy game, 'secrecy' helps to measure commitment: Individuals who are not security-conscious should be aware that while anyone can share information that is not punishable by law, one can be risking one's life and/or liberty IF data that is shared is considered sensitive to the interests of a country. This applies regardless of whether information was shared deliberately or as an oversight, without full appreciation of its seriousness.

A 2026 security alert from the British intelligence service MI5 warned that Chinese military intelligence operatives were posing as recruiters for private consultancies, think tanks and human resources (HR) firms. They advertised remote or part-time positions online to individuals who had previously worked for Five Eyes governments (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia or New Zealand). Candidates who passed the initial screening were increasingly pressured to provide "non-public information". According to the alert, those most vulnerable included "persons with either indirect or peripheral access to government information, e.g. academics, journalists, freelance writers, think tank employees, or anyone with links to defence, security, policy and economic sectors".

A second British security alert similarly cautioned that foreign intelligence services (FIS) do not restrict recruitment to individuals with access to classified information. Instead, "information sought by FIS may not necessarily be 'classified' or an obvious target for espionage. Your insights and network of contacts can form valuable 'pieces of the jigsaw' when brought together with other information."

This broader trend was also identified in a Swedish study of 70 espionage cases uncovered in Europe between 2008 and 2024. It found that foreign intelligence agencies increasingly target not only individuals with access to military secrets, but also those working in healthcare, energy research, food production, green technologies, government and academia.

The vast majority of NGOs are not involved in espionage, nor is the small minority that is believed to consciously carry it out on an institutional level. Rather, it can be argued that any NGO linked to espionage is more likely to be preparing an operational infrastructure for

spying, through routine professional activity carried out by unwitting assets, ready to be exploited by professional intelligence agencies as and when required.

Part II

OVERLAP BETWEEN NGOS AND SPY AGENCIES



Source: Generated Using ChatGPT

Both entities – spy agencies and NGOs – deal with information gathered from local human interactions and instrumentalise its circulation to serve the interests of their funders. There are four ways NGOs can complement the activities of spy agencies.

1. NGOs as Operational Cover

First, to provide **cover for intelligence officers** who are not accredited diplomats to enter foreign countries and connect with marginalised elements of local society. Because NGOs often focus on socio-political and socio-economic issues, they seek their donors' appreciation by gaining access to and building credibility with ground-level communities.

Among the periphery of such communities are usually to be found individuals who might be ready to act as hired hands for anyone who pays them well. Irrespective of whether the goal is to find logistical enablers for a covert operation or sub-agents for an espionage ring that can monitor a weapons testing facility, getting a trained agent-handler on the ground to assess local recruitment potential is necessary. This job might eventually be subcontracted to local assets, but in the initial stages of an intelligence operation, even such assets would have to be talent-spotted by a trusted outsider and then trained to operate as principal agents in a spy network.

Many NGOs deal with contentious issues, such as fighting corruption or various forms of ethnic, racial or religious discrimination. This predisposes them to collect political gossip

from opponents of incumbent authority figures, whether these be elected politicians or career civil servants. In the process, they acquire useful data that can be used to create psychological profiles of potential espionage assets. These profiles are essential to agent recruitment.

2. Fieldwork and Intelligence Collection

A second way NGOs can support HUMINT is by **collecting situational information** during fieldwork. Unlike undercover intelligence officers, bona fide NGO employees need not have training in covert communication, agent assessment, and countersurveillance tactics. They only need to be able to enter and leave areas where known employees of a foreign government are unable to travel without observation by local police. Meanwhile, the funding ecosystem of foreign NGOs fetishises ground-level awareness of trends in developing countries. Donor organisations typically want data based on first-hand observation.

In the process of conducting fieldwork, NGO staff can observe non-sensitive variables such as vigilance levels among security forces, corruption among petty bureaucrats, community sentiment towards authority figures, the rate of public infrastructure development and such like.

None of this data is, by itself, worth the expense of dispatching an undercover intelligence officer to collect. All of it can be acquired by a legitimate NGO fact-finding mission. Yet, in certain locations, such as border regions, this information can have military implications and help in guiding the focus of subsequent signal or imagery intelligence efforts. By itself, technical collection yields far too much raw information to be useful in its unprocessed form – it needs to be juxtaposed with insights from human sources, even if these are itinerant agents.

3. Access to Decision-Makers and Elite Networks

The third area of overlap between NGO and spy work is in **gaining physical access to policymakers** through informal networks of friends, family and professional associates. It is a known practice for foreign NGOs to build trust with government departments in developing countries by hiring the progeny of senior bureaucrats.

A security breach can occur if the access of these privileged 'nepo-kids' is leveraged to set up unsupervised meetings between foreigners and government officials. For example, if a conference is organised at an overseas location, and a foreign NGO covers the travel costs. The NGO can legitimately request personal information in advance about travelling participants, including scanned copies of their passports. This information subsequently becomes available to anyone with access, authorised or not, to the NGO's internal databases. It can be used to track the movements of a potential recruitment prospect who might travel abroad for other personal reasons, say, to visit relatives living in the West.

Like almost all employers, large NGOs vet candidates prior to hiring, a process that informally establishes which candidates may have personal access to the corridors of power in a certain country. Staff additions serve as a tool for gaining operational reach within decision-making circles. The aim here would not necessarily be to collect secret information, but to gain access to individuals in another country's governing apparatus who are normally unreachable.



Source: Generated Using ChatGPT

4. Narrative Building and Information Influence

The fourth area where civil society activism and espionage activities overlap is in **strategic communication** designed to shape local narratives. Both foreign NGOs and spy agencies engage in overseas influence campaigns. The difference is that NGOs engage in white propaganda, i.e., publishing material and circulating ideas under their real organisational identity, whereas spy agencies engage in black propaganda, i.e., publishing material and ideas on an unattributed basis. Sometimes, an NGO can be used to launder black propaganda by claiming ownership of research findings that either strengthen or diminish the image of a foreign government, even though they originate from intelligence channels that cannot be identified publicly.

One tool for governments to run each other down is to provide funding for index projects that are executed by supposedly independent and impartial NGOs. These projects 'rank' various countries in order of how well or poorly they are doing according to a certain parameter. That parameter could be domestic stability, combating discrimination or corruption, adhering to international legal obligations, or almost anything else that the

sponsoring government deems indicative of a performance gap between itself and the governments of hostile states.

The scoring methodology used to compile such indices is given a veneer of credibility through a budget for external peer review by international consultants. No matter what methodology is used, the terms of reference assigned to external reviewers can be drafted to limit their discretion and ensure that their conclusions, while supposedly value-neutral, are weighted towards the normative standards advocated by the project's financiers.

Once such a project is completed, it is in the organisational interests of an NGO to ensure that the end product comes to media attention, both within donor countries and elsewhere. 'Showing impact' by citing favourable press coverage in overseas jurisdictions helps an NGO impress its donors that project invoices are worth the money billed on them. Through a process of circular citation, wherein NGO reports (including the rankings of index projects) are cited in international media, and then the same media reports are used to inform the analyses of other NGOs as well as reputed scholars at academic institutions, what starts out as a compilation of subjective expert opinions over the course of time hardens into objective facts, 'corroborated' by multiple sources.

5. Funding, Information Flows and Strategic Leverage

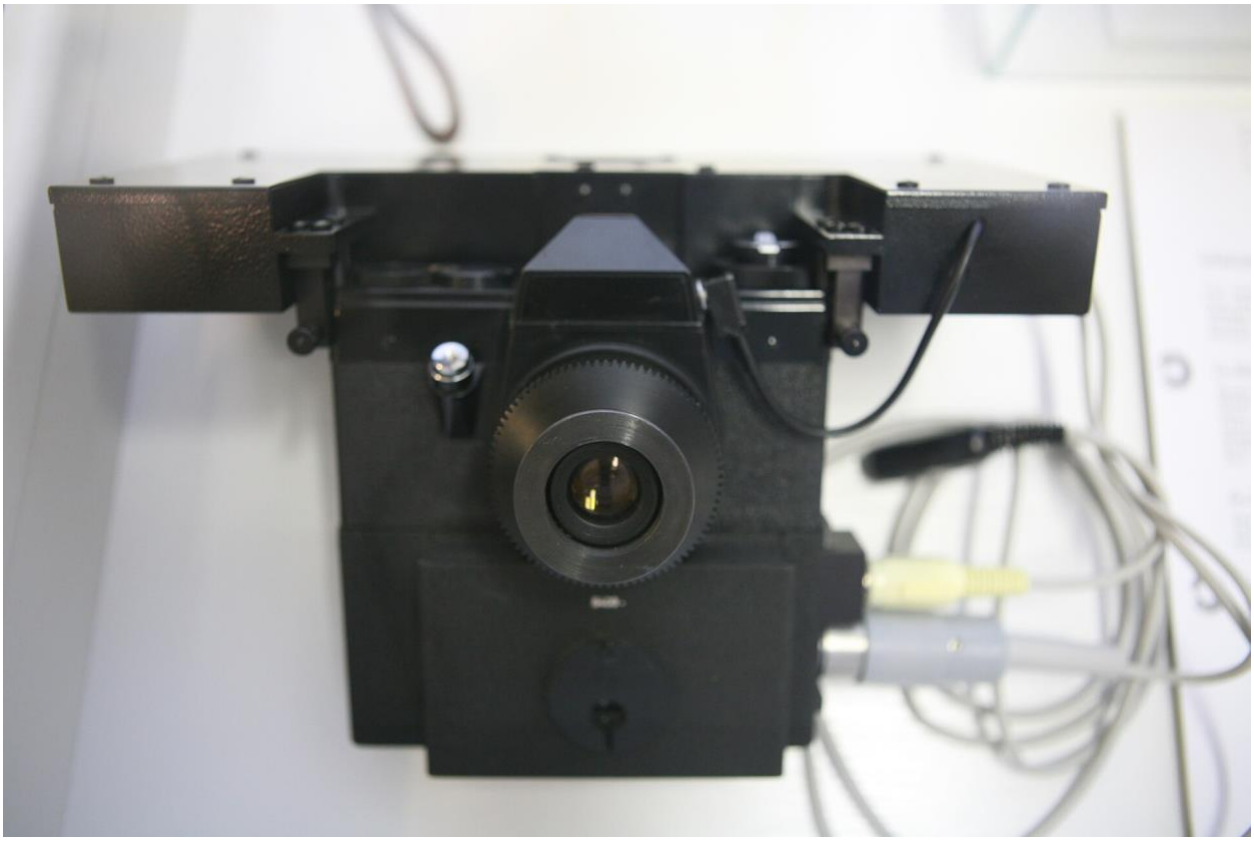
To sum it up, the activities of a foreign-based and funded NGO that operates transnationally might not be identical with those of a spy agency, but there is a degree of methodological overlap that makes such an NGO susceptible to occasional covert manipulation by foreign spymasters. The crucial issue remains: who provides the organisation's funding?

NGOs that operate globally are typically funded by countries of the Global North, but their operations, in terms of data collection and awareness-raising, are concentrated in countries of the Global South. There is a unidirectional flow of granular information, policy advice and debate-framing narratives. The information flows from South to North while the advice and narratives flow from North to South. A normative hierarchy is created in which colonial-era relationships are replicated among nominally sovereign nations. These relationships do not affect the balance of 'hard power' between the two sides. Factors such as military strength, economic performance, and scientific and technological differentials remain as they always have been.

'Soft power' variables, on the other hand, such as cultural attractiveness, international perceptions of friendliness to investment, and quality of governance, can be manipulated in favour of or against a government in the Global South, depending on geopolitical considerations. Especially in the case of index projects, the subjective nature of the ranking process leaves considerable room for manipulation of national scores and for seeding narratives about 'bad' or 'ineffective' policies.

PART III

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES: OVERLAP BETWEEN NGO AND INTELLIGENCE WORK



Stasi spy camera, from the Stasi Museum in Berlin. Source: Wikimedia Commons

A Czech intelligence officer who, along with his wife, defected to the United States in the 1960s later secured employment at the CIA as a translator and analyst. They claimed to be political dissidents from communist ruled Czechoslovakia. Before joining the agency, he had worked at Radio Free Europe, a CIA-backed broadcaster covering developments behind the Iron Curtain. Reflecting on his espionage career, he recognised the potential of NGOs as instruments for intelligence collection and psychological operations.

In the early 1980s, he proposed establishing NGOs as fronts for intelligence work. Although the idea was dismissed at the time, it has since become a recognised feature of modern intelligence operations. Ironically, the proposal was made to a Czech intelligence officer who was himself secretly working for the CIA, illustrating the extent to which intelligence agencies had already penetrated one another's organisations.

The use of NGOs as instruments of influence has been more characteristic of Western democracies than authoritarian states, which have traditionally relied on professional lobbyists and public relations firms. One possible reason is that Western governments such

as the USA and some of its wealthy European partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, such as the UK, Germany, Norway and Denmark, have developed extensive funding ecosystems that support international NGOs working on issues such as human rights, environmental protection and good governance. Over time, these funding structures have normalised close institutional links between governments and sections of the NGO sector.

Russia – a Perennial Target of Western NGOs

On 22 January 2006, Russian television viewers were presented with an unusual story: the British intelligence service MI6 had been caught by the Federal Security Service (FSB) operating a spy network among Russian NGOs. Four British diplomats communicated with their Russian contacts using a 'fake rock' placed in a Moscow park. The hollowed-out rock concealed a radio transceiver and data-storage device. Russian agents walking past transmitted information from handheld computers to the rock, which later relayed the data to British diplomats carrying similar devices. Functioning as an electronic dead-letter drop, it eliminated the need for direct physical contact between the two sides.

Contacts with Russian NGOs could readily be presented as routine engagement in support of universal human rights, unlike clandestine meetings with serving military personnel. Financial support to NGOs could similarly be justified under the UK government's declared commitment to humanitarian causes. This extended beyond funding: when a Russian parliamentarian proposed legislation to tighten oversight of NGOs, the British ambassador, accompanied by an embassy-based MI6 officer, reportedly visited his office to lobby against the measure.

Britain's official response was deliberately ambiguous and stopped short of a categorical denial. Six years later, however, a senior official who had served in the British Prime Minister's Office at the time acknowledged that the Russian allegations were accurate, describing the episode as "embarrassing" for the UK government and admitting that the Russians "had us bang to rights."

Russian President Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB officer, responded with characteristic humour, remarking that the MI6 officers should not be expelled because any replacements sent from London might prove more competent. The German magazine Der Spiegel was less amused, observing: "London seems not to have established a clear division between its spies and its NGO helpers. And the implication is that Britain's James Bonds seem unwittingly to have done Russia's human rights campaigners a disservice in the process." The criticism reflected the fact that many Russian NGOs relied on overseas funding, including politically active organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy.

MI6's links with certain activists—reportedly intended both to shape domestic debates and identify potential intelligence assets—ultimately cast suspicion over the wider Russian NGO community. By the time the operation was exposed, the FSB had already spent several months warning the Russian public about the risks posed by foreign-funded NGOs.

In May 2005, FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev linked the wave of Colour Revolutions in the post-Soviet space to Western government sponsorship of NGOs. During a visit to Moscow, US President George W. Bush publicly assured Russian critics of the government that they would receive American support in promoting democracy. Coming years after Russia's democratic transition, the statement was interpreted in Moscow as evidence that Washington was willing to influence Russia's domestic political landscape.



The Lubyanka Building – Headquarters of the FSB. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The FSB had previously acted on similar concerns. In 2002, it expelled more than two dozen US Peace Corps personnel, alleging that some had collected information on regional political and economic conditions, while others had entered restricted border areas or cultivated inappropriate local contacts. According to Patrushev, some of the expelled individuals were "collecting information about the sociopolitical and economic situation in Russian regions, about government employees and administrators and the course of elections." The FSB Director pointed out that one of the Peace Corps workers had been caught entering a

restricted zone near the Russian border with China, and another had been discovered making inappropriate contacts, presumably to talent-spot potential local agents.

Despite the widespread perception that Russia broadly suppresses civil society, approximately 300,000 NGOs continued to operate in the country in late 2012; the overwhelming majority engaged in cultural, sporting and charitable activities. Official scrutiny focused primarily on organisations involved in policy advocacy and research, particularly those receiving foreign funding.

Around 2009, as many as 46% of organisations broadly classified as NGOs were engaged in educational or research activities. Some of these platforms, depending on their nature, could also be used for political messaging or the collection of granular intelligence. When the Russian government later tightened regulations governing educational activities, the measures were widely portrayed as an attempt to burden NGOs with excessive bureaucracy.

Infiltrating Undercover Officers into NGOs and Viewing Field Staff as Sources

A 2024 investigative journalism report on a Latvia-based website called The Insider described alleged efforts of the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU, to infiltrate NGOs within Russia as well as abroad. It claimed that undercover GRU personnel had posed as human rights activists, environmentalists and trade journalists in a bid to monitor organisations critical of the Russian government. Some of these organisations have received American funding. Whether they were legitimate targets for intelligence collection is impossible to say, given the politicised nature of such a question. One must remember that the US itself has extremely stringent laws about organisations and individuals within its jurisdiction acting as foreign agents, to the point of institutional paranoia among the American security community.

Russia, on its part, deemed The Insider a foreign agent in July 2021. How the team that runs the website obtained confidential information from within Russia, including details about personnel who allegedly worked with the GRU, remains unclear.

The Russian military intelligence service strongly believes that the West has been waging a 'hybrid war' using a combination of NGOs and international news media agencies to target Russia. Not all of those blamed are American and British-based. Owing to close security ties between Anglo-American countries and continental European states within NATO, some of these instruments of hybrid warfare are located in Europe, even if their funding sources lie elsewhere.

Another investigative journalism website, this time based in the US, once claimed in 2017 that a female Scottish aid worker who had been killed in 2010 in Afghanistan had been secretly working with MI6 at the time of her death. The claim was supposedly based on statements by four US military and intelligence officials. It was discarded by the deceased's

parents. Considering that the woman had been killed in a botched American rescue mission after being kidnapped by the Taliban, the claim might have been an attempt to soften American culpability for her death. Conversely, the fact that it was made some years afterwards, when media attention had long since shifted to other topics, raises the question of why American officials would risk reigniting public interest in the episode. Whatever the truth may be, the slain aid worker was working for an American NGO when she was kidnapped, a role that required her to have close contact with ordinary Afghans. This would have made her an accessible target for abduction, compared to officials of the American or British governments. This case highlights the risk that some NGO staff face, regardless of whether they are personally involved in espionage-related activities.

Scouting for Future Operations

One example of an American faith-based NGO allegedly used for intelligence purposes was Humanitarian International Services Group (HISG). This entity was founded shortly after 9/11 as a humble three-person organisation and grew significantly before being disbanded in 2013. It was funded by the Pentagon via foundations and trusts that disbursed government money to the NGO sector. The US Department of Defence was at that time looking to copy CIA tactics and either set up or take control of NGOs that could be used as fronts for espionage missions. HISG was reportedly one of the beneficiaries of a wider Pentagon scheme.

The strategic objective was to have an array of nominally respectable and non-threatening aid organisations that could gain access to places where neither the US government nor friendly European states could send their official representatives. Places like North Korea, whose nuclear program was a high-priority intelligence collection target. HISG managed access to the country because the North Korean regime was occasionally willing to accept foreign aid to alleviate the hardships faced by large sections of its population. Using this channel, one of the NGO's founders, who was its main link to the Pentagon, helped identify weaknesses in North Korea's border security system that could later be exploited for intelligence missions.

Since HISG's work involved delivering humanitarian aid across countries, the individual had legitimate reasons to connect with local Christian missionaries and other aid organisations. He tapped into their knowledge of North Korea. He also allegedly used the services of Chinese smugglers to move military equipment into the country. This equipment is believed to have included sensors, radio beacons, and signal jammers, all of which were to be cached for use in any future conflict between the US and North Korea.

Although HISG operated in over 30 countries, the vast majority of its staff never had any idea they were part of a Pentagon-funded program. To them, the organisation was engaged in innocent activities such as providing food aid, medical supplies, and clothing to conflict-affected regions and disaster zones, and creating micro-businesses to help impoverished

localities in developing countries. Only the senior-most leadership of the organisation, besides the Pentagon linkman, might have known where its funding came from.

Assessing Databases and Electronic Traffic of NGOs

Besides using personnel working in NGOs as instruments of espionage, Western intelligence agencies also hack into the digital infrastructure of these organisations. They do so in the name of national security, but their activities demonstrate beyond any doubt that any local information shared with an NGO worker can assume intelligence value if it ends up in the hands of national security analysts and covert action planners.

The American National Security Agency (NSA) and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), two of the world's top signals intelligence agencies, regularly target international aid organisations, including United Nations bodies such as UNICEF, for information held in internal databases. The agencies also access electronic communications such as emails, audio and video calls, and text messages. One outraged commentator has written of such activities: 'Surveillance of humanitarian organisations under the guise of national security should be thought of as equivalent to bombing hospitals during war.' That may be true, but the surveillance happens all the same, just as hospitals get bombed in wartime, whether accidentally or deliberately.

The German spy agency, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), justified its surveillance of an entity called the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) on counterterrorism grounds. ANSO was funded by the European Union and the governments of Switzerland and Norway, two states that strive to cultivate a relatively benign image of promoting peace and reconciliation worldwide. It was operated by the German NGO Welthungerhilfe, which focuses on strengthening food security in developing countries. A more non-offensive identity can hardly be imagined.

Yet because the ANSO was deemed a repository of useful information and insights on the security situation in Afghanistan, including potential threats to German interests, the BND monitored the office's email communications. Over 2,000 emails, telephone calls and fax messages were monitored during a surveillance operation that lasted two and a half years. Other NGOs in Afghanistan, meanwhile, acting in good faith, had shared information with ANSO, believing that, in doing so, they would keep their workers safe. To be fair, the BND's snooping did not jeopardise the safety of the NGO staff, as could have been the case, for example, if the spy agency had used any of the NGOs as a cover for supporting direct action missions such as a commando raid. The episode, however, demonstrated what many NGOs have long since known: that their level of protection against technical snooping is so abysmally low as to be non-existent. Whatever information an NGO possesses within its internal computer systems, a reasonably competent intelligence agency can always access it.

Use of NGO Cover to Support Military Action

One of the most sensational events that came out of an intelligence overlap with the NGO world was the US raid on Abbottabad that killed Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in May 2011. The man who is credited with helping to locate bin Laden, Dr Shakil Afridi, seems to have been a textbook example of an espionage dupe. Afridi had briefly fled to the United States from his native Pakistan in 2008, after an episode of being kidnapped for ransom. Disillusioned with life in California, he returned to Pakistan. In late 2009, he attended a seminar for healthcare professionals that was hosted by the UK-based NGO 'Save the Children'. While at the seminar, he later claimed, he was approached by an Australian national who was working for Save the Children. The Australian introduced Afridi to an American woman who was working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This woman was responsible for overseeing the USAID vaccination program among frontier tribes who lived along the disputed Afghan-Pakistan boundary.



Source: Generated Using ChatGPT

Afridi stayed in touch with the woman through the course of 2010, sharing information about his own experience of being kidnapped and his knowledge of drug trafficking between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which he had gleaned from years of living in the frontier region. In January 2011, the American approached him with a proposal to conduct a Hepatitis B vaccination campaign in Abbottabad. He would receive a payment equivalent to approximately 12,750 US dollars (13 lakh Pakistani rupees at the time). The money was paid directly to his personal bank account and not routed through any official channels. This was apparently not seen as suspicious because many Western NGOs operating in Pakistan played fast and loose with local regulations on payments to contractors to skip layers of government

bureaucracy. Yet, Afridi seems to have been acutely gullible in not questioning why he needed to hide in the back of a car whenever he travelled for meetings with the American woman at a USAID facility.

Afridi was, in the course of time, introduced to a second American woman, who told him to carry out the Abbottabad program personally. This woman, whom he had allegedly met through Save the Children's network in Pakistan, was his CIA handler. He went about plastering banners around town announcing the vaccination program, and in late April 2011, he arrived at the front gate of a large house. This was the location that, less than two weeks later, was raided by US special operations forces. It was Afridi who, under pressure from his CIA contact to gain entry to every household, obtained the telephone number of the house's owner. When the CIA eavesdropped on the number, they identified it as belonging to a trusted courier of bin Laden. On the strength of this intelligence, gathered in the guise of humanitarian work, the then-US President Barack Obama approved a military raid on the house. Afridi, his role over, became dispensable. The CIA made no effort to protect him from arrest by the Pakistani government, although the agency has an annual quota of roughly 100 resettlement visas which can be used to extract high-value sources if they are burned and need to escape. Not being a senior intelligence or military official of a hostile country, Afridi was not worth the trouble of saving. Save the Children denied that its Pakistan office had been complicit in espionage, but Pakistani officials concluded that the NGO simply lacked the means to prevent infiltration of its ranks by Western intelligence personnel.

PART IV

INDIA IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF FOREIGN PROPAGANDISTS



Source: Generated using ChatGPT

In February 2012, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told an interviewer: "There are NGOs, often funded by the United States and the Scandinavian countries, which are not fully appreciative of the development challenges that our country faces." The Prime Minister pointed to efforts to organise mass demonstrations against nuclear power plants. Two years later, a leaked memo from the Intelligence Bureau confirmed what PM Singh had said. The IB Report identified several Western NGOs that were "serving as tools for foreign policy interests of Western governments".

The modus operandi of such groups was a standard penetration tactic: partner with grassroots organisations to gain credibility with both foreign donors and local observers. Tellingly, many of the areas where these NGOs were active featured the prefix 'anti'. The NGOs were 'anti-nuclear, anti-coal and anti-Genetically Modified Organisms.' They were also anti-mining, anti-oil exploration, and anti-dam-building. In other words, they were anti-development and offered no useful services to benefit the common man in India. The Intelligence Bureau is said to have calculated that the economic damage caused by their activities could be in the range of 2-3% of India's Gross Domestic Product.

Behavioural Patterns of Foreign NGOs in India

Based on personal observations, the author of this essay has noted three patterns of foreign NGO behaviour regarding India, which are not favourable to building a trusting relationship:

1. **A tendency to hyphenate India and Pakistan, to the point of analytic distortion** – NGO managers are keen to impress Western donor governments by showing an operational presence in India and a matching presence in Pakistan, which helps in demonstrating their reach and credibility. Pakistan, as a country, is adept at manipulating foreign visitors by extending a veneer of hospitality under the aegis of the Pakistani military.

   When it comes to Western NGOs, especially because these organisations often deal with normative arguments about what is 'good' governance or not, any hyphenation between India and Pakistan is automatically an insult to India and an ill-deserved promotion for Pakistan. Furthermore, in order to avoid accusations of partisanship, some NGOs suppress unflattering data about the Pakistani state apparatus and its authoritarian tendencies (for example, the military's corrupt and predatory economic practices), thereby maintaining their hard-won access to Pakistani elites.

   At the same time, they emphasise negative reporting about India to show that they are unafraid to question the effectiveness of democratic practices in a developing-world context. To be fair, this is not necessarily a universal tendency and appears to be more pronounced among Anglo-American NGOs because of a colonial-era British prejudice (inherited by the Americans) that treating India and Pakistan equitably signals 'impartiality'.

2. **A practice of 'flying under the radar' while conducting fieldwork** – Unlike academic researchers who, if they wish to stay out of trouble with Indian immigration authorities, apply for research visas through established procedures, Western NGO workers sometimes fly into the country on their privileged passports and take advantage of e-visa/visa-on-arrival facilities. They do not declare that the purpose of their visit is to collect information through local interviews about political, economic and social conditions.

   NGOs do not adopt such casual methods when dealing with rich Western countries, whose every legal requirement is met when completing paperwork. Occasionally, to create a layer of 'deniability' in any technical wrongdoing, Western NGOs might subcontract the task of conducting field interviews to freelance researchers who live in the West (basically, mercenaries of the research world). These freelancers travel as 'tourists' to developing countries such as India. They carry 'burner' phones which contain no compromising data about their broader activities and 'clean' laptops. They almost never have a publication history, but their fieldwork results are the backbone of

NGO reporting, whether these reports are openly published or confidentially shared with donors.

3. **A focus on marginalised sections of Indian society, or on border regions** – In their eagerness to impress Western donor governments about their local access, Western NGOs look for negative trends among discontented demographics or peripheral regions of India. The Northeast has become an attractive area for data collection owing to the low threshold for conducting 'original research' about the region in Western academic and policy discourse.

   While most observers know about Indian macroeconomic and macro-political trends and geostrategic tensions with China and Pakistan, insurgent movements in the Northeast and their cross-border linkages with Myanmar remain objects of curiosity among Western epistemological communities.

   Travel to parts of the region has been restricted to foreigners, meaning that the academic information gap about local society and its relations with the Indian state apparatus is a magnet for intrusive (and illegal) research efforts. A retired Indian intelligence officer suggested to the author of this essay that one of the reasons why Western NGOs are interested in the Northeast region is because their donor governments are possibly looking for cross-border entry points into Myanmar so that they can covertly influence the civil war in that country.

Conclusion

At the end, the concern is not with think tanks or NGOs as institutions but with the wider ecosystem that gathers, interprets and transforms information into narratives to influence international perception and policymaking. This ecosystem has been built over the decade through foreign funding, especially from the Western world. These organisations operate across jurisdictions and engage in politically sensitive fieldwork which demands greater transparency and compliance with domestic laws. For India, safeguarding sovereignty from compromised NGOs requires not only responding to external narratives but also ensuring that the process through which information is collected within its borders remains lawful, transparent and accountable.

[The article is exclusive to NatStrat. The views expressed by the author(s) are personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.]

© 2026 NatStrat India. All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from NatStrat India.

Attribution: Dr. Prem Mahadevan, "The Use of NGOs for Espionage and Propaganda", NatStrat, 2026.

Disclaimer:

- All articles are exclusively written for NatStrat India, except wherever indicated
- Views are personal to each author

NatStrat India
D-319, Defence Colony
New Delhi 110024
India

NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology and economy.



NatStrat

Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

www.natstrat.org

The Use of NGOs for Espionage and Propaganda, 2026