

Indian Foreign Policy

Changing Requirements and India's Response

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India's foreign policy management and delivery critically need improvement. Going beyond incremental improvements, straightforward and clearly delineated foreign policy objectives should be developed. Coordinating with non-state actors, nurturing relations with neighbouring nations, and a diplomatic overhaul should be the key elements of India's foreign policy.

As a rising power, India needs a foreign policy that projects its interests and its future possibilities. As a country that has a seat at the global table, projecting confidence to shape events on a large canvas should be the hallmark of India's foreign policy. India should not restrict its foreign policy scope to a narrow or proximate horizon. Moreover, it needs diplomatic structures and methods that effectively deliver on those objectives. This perspective has been formed on the basis of a 35-year-old career in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and my independent study of diplomatic processes. This is not a perspective that Indian diplomatic elements have considered and applied in a consistent manner (Rana 2005, 2011, 2013b, 2016).

Consider the 2013 edited monograph, *Non-Alignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the 21st Century*, with contributions from social scientists, diplomats, and journalists. The authors of this book recommended that Indian diplomacy should be based on strategic autonomy. Reviewing the book, I summarised its narrative of India's foreign policy, in the words of the authors, as follows:

to secure the maximum space possible for its own economic growth ... The window of opportunity for India to become a relatively prosperous nation is relatively small ... the next ten to fifteen years ... once certain institutional choices and development pathways are adopted, it will be very hard to change them ... If we do not seize the opportunities provided by a relatively benign environment, we will not get a second chance to correct our mistakes. (Rana 2013a)

A major limitation of the book was the lack of a road map for the changes required in effective implementation and improved delivery of foreign policy.

The authors of *Non-Alignment 2.0* had expected that their work might provoke

a national debate on foreign policy. However, that did not happen. Despite the social and intellectual stature of the authors and the quasi-official role of some, most analysts did not consider the book a credible statement of India's foreign policy objectives. Of course it does not help that the government has published no white paper or detailed statement on India's foreign policy objectives, even as a discussion paper. We seem to profoundly distrust such statements of national vision, and do not invite open discussion of such issues.

Foreign ministries, as institutions managing the external interests of countries in the contemporary global environment marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity—also known by its acronym VUCA—need to continually reflect and adapt. We do this in New Delhi, but inadequately.

Many foreign ministries have published reports on their reform agenda, while others have internally handled their reform actions. The only published document on reform in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is the Pillai report of 1966, which argued a defensive case, in the first year of Indira Gandhi's rule. This was at a time when many in the government wanted to clip the wings of the Indian diplomatic system, after its relative primacy under the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was also foreign minister from 1947 to 1964. The published document led to no changes in the MEA. Rather it became relatively isolated from the other ministries and official agencies.¹

Over the years, the MEA has carried out significant changes, but almost always in an incremental fashion, without a master plan or clearly targeted objectives. Nevertheless, these incremental changes have permitted the MEA to retain its cutting edge as one of the world's leading diplomatic establishments.

The most significant adaptation came after the end of the Cold War, when some of the legacy of objectives in Indian foreign policy, especially non-alignment, lost relevance, and external actions had to be tailored to match the overriding goals of the post-1991 economic reforms. This has been handled in an adroit

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fashion for the large part. There were several important policy changes starting from this juncture. First, relations with the West were reframed with pragmatic adaptation to the demise of the erstwhile Soviet Union, while at the same time sustaining effective cooperation with Russia. Second, the relationship with China has received increased attention, focused on diversification and incremental steps to stabilise the situation on the disputed border through sustained dialogue. This sustained dialogue produced a series of agreements that reduced tension and set in place limited confidence-building measures. As the June–August 2017 Doklam confrontation (at the tri-junction of the India–China–Bhutan border) showed, this has remained a work in progress.

The Narendra Modi–Xi Jinping “informal summit” of April 2018 at Wuhan has shown that both countries have a stake in stabilising relations for mutual gain. Also, neighbourhood diplomacy, neglected till recently, has received a new push since the National Democratic Alliance government took office in May 2014. The quality of relations has markedly improved with most of the neighbouring countries, with the exception of Pakistan. Nonetheless, the MEA has put in a lot of effort behind mending relations with Pakistan. Finally, economic cooperation, especially aid projects, have been better executed with the establishment of the MEA’s Development Partnership Administration in 2012, although project execution remains a critical bottleneck.

At a systemic level, challenges persist in the MEA’s capacity to implement foreign policy. First and foremost, inter-ministerial coordination remains a key deficit. Some recent steps may help, but the goal of an effective “whole-of-government” foreign policy has remained elusive. Second, in the past five years, the MEA has finally opened its portals to in-placement of officials from other ministries, agencies, and the private sector. But these are not sufficient to give the MEA the capability to handle all its expanded tasks. Staff shortage inhibits effective actions at the headquarters of the Indian diplomatic establishment. Next, the implementation of a 2007 decision to

double the strength of the IRS cadre has been slow, with numbers having risen in the past 11 years from around 550 to 850. Brazil, under President Lula in the early 2000s implemented a much more rapid expansion. For the MEA, this has produced serious limitations. Finally, top management capacity remains another major capacity constraint and this issue deserves more attention (Rana 2017d).

The question that persists is if the positives are sufficient or whether the lack of a strategic master plan and improved policy direction blocks the MEA from fully realising its potential (Rana 2017b, 2017c).

What should be the content of our national foreign policy? And, moving beyond abstract statements, what are the practical actions that need to be carried out? Three actionable themes are examined here as key priorities.

Non-state Actors

A resurgent India demands a foreign policy that is appropriate for a world player. We are in the process of taking our place at the global table with a surging economy, and having reached the position of the world’s fifth largest economy, we are set to move higher up that ladder. In international affairs, that means moving from an earlier reactive mindset to a confident one, recognising that our own actions contribute to shaping this future. That needs deeper cognition by our state agencies, and greater understanding and support from home publics.

We should understand that a foreign ministry has no “natural” home constituency and, therefore, no one to automatically support the foreign ministry. This means that budget allocations are hard to obtain, and are usually much less than needed for effective foreign policy implementation. Almost every country faces a similar challenge. Thinking outside the box, supportive stakeholders have to be located and persuaded. This means an active domestic public diplomacy, convincing and informing the common public on the role of the foreign ministry and to garner support. The MEA now attempts this, through its public diplomacy programme and social media

outreach, but more effort is needed. Some months before the recent exchange of Prime Minister–level visits with Israel, the secretaries of key ministries were taken by the MEA on a preparatory visit to Israel; it was probably the first time that such a method was used. In another instance, a new “States Division” has been created at the MEA that handles outreach to state governments, treating them as important partners in implementing foreign policy actions in key countries. The MEA now takes into its key units officials from other ministries, but MEA officials remain reluctant to go and work in other ministries, although both the posts and a demand for such interchange exists. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj is proactive in inviting Indians abroad facing difficulties to contact her, and she is genuinely responsive. Embassies have also become more responsive.

Yet, the MEA has not crafted sustained, collegial relations with other ministries and agencies, although there have been periods when it has worked well with them. What is missing is an institutional mechanism for regular consultation, for well-coordinated actions. This problem is not unique to India, but it is more acute than elsewhere, and in particular often affects the implementation of projects in neighbouring countries. If other ministries do not feel a sense of ownership or commitment in the execution of foreign policy objectives, it becomes impossible to deliver “whole of government” foreign policy. The majority of projects that India undertakes abroad, be it in Nepal or Myanmar, or in Africa, are delayed unconscionably. It is not difficult to establish an institutional mechanism for this purpose, but this has not evolved so far, even in the MEA’s relations with its principal ministerial partners, notably commerce, defence, finance, and home, and indeed all the agencies that are important players on external policy implementation. Should this not be high on our agenda?

The Indian establishment has an aversion to setting out strategic objectives for external affairs. We do not present a clear vision statement on India’s foreign policy objectives. Although we can point to major Indian statements that set out

broad objectives, it can also be said that most of those objectives are self-evident and are unlikely to influence long-term policy.

A well-deliberated, explicit statement of foreign policy objectives, serves two major purposes. First, it should provoke a national debate on foreign policy of a kind we have not held for a long time, setting out India's long-term and non-partisan goals. Second, these objectives become the locus of more detailed, planned actions. They lead to a comprehensive external action plan, cascaded down to three levels. These might be called primary objectives, target goals, and required actions. Some countries publish such foreign policy master plans (those of Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom [UK], and the United States [US], are available on their foreign ministry websites), right up to the point of summarising their detailed plans. Other countries treat these as confidential, but the plans exist. A grand schema of foreign policy objectives is crucial to such an action agenda (Rana 2017b).

There are other ways to handle such planning. Consider the French method of "Ambassadors Instructions":

before any ambassador takes up assignment, the secretary general of Quai d'Orsay hands over a customised document, running to between two to five pages (not counting annexures); it is drawn up in consultation with all the key ministries and official agencies that have a major stake in that bilateral relationship. Within six months the envoy must get back to the secretary general with his "plan of action" for implementing the instructions. The method is exquisitely Cartesian. The wonder is that more foreign ministries do not use this; Germany and Italy adopted this method in the past decade, with mixed result.²

Other planning methods have been used elsewhere. In the mid-2000s, under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's inspiration, the Thailand government drew up five-year forward bilateral plans in respect of about 25 of its priority foreign partner countries. While the foreign ministry coordinated the work, all ministries contributed to these plans. They identified the objectives that were to be pursued for each of those relationships, and set out the coordinated actions needed to achieve these.

Many options are available, if we look to the experience of other countries. We should not copy anyone, but these experiences provide templates for crafting our own methods. The common element in all is that clear objectives are set out covering relations with priority countries; actions are then aligned to reach these objectives. This has to be on a "whole of government" basis, not leaving out actions by non-state actors that can be co-opted for these tasks.

It should be noted that India is slowly adopting a culture of inviting non-state actors to fulfil its foreign policy objectives. At the 31st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meet in December 2017, celebrating 25 years of partnership, for the first time, Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj advanced a concrete, forward-looking slogan: "Commerce, Connectivity, and Culture." This is brilliant, capturing the essence of Narendra Modi's Act East Policy, in an actionable format. Those three words—commerce, connectivity and culture—could become the centrepiece of a detailed plan of action on how India can advance its relationship with the 10 ASEAN states in concrete ways. But, I am not sure if this marks real change, since subsequent statements on relationships with ASEAN countries do not repeat that formula. This seems to illustrate the erratic nature of our work methods.

We now work more closely in New Delhi with non-state actors than before. For example, the annual Raisina Dialogue is handled by the Observer Research Foundation (a think tank), which places India more firmly on the map for think tank-driven global policy discussions. There has been a mushrooming of other discussion groups driven by different research institutes and a gradual growth in the number and quality of such policy analysis institutes. The MEA's recruitment of academic researches to work in its policy planning and other units (some of them should be posted to major embassies) is also praiseworthy. However, more needs to be done if we need to move fast on our foreign policy objectives.

The MEA, which has a direct responsibility for the country's economic diplomacy, also needs an economic diplomacy

council, drawn from industry associations and business enterprises. In a similar fashion, we should establish a public diplomacy board, holding regular consultations with all the official and non-official agencies that contribute to India's global image and outreach to foreign publics, including tourism and business promotion.³ This method works well in other countries. China makes extensive use of its selected retired ambassadors, in advisory groups and to examine specific issues. We have the Association of Indian Diplomats—a gathering of former diplomats and staff on diplomatic missions consisting of retired envoys, which publishes a fine academic journal (*Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*), but plays no sustained advisory role.

Partnering with Neighbours

In our age of globalised diplomacy, we face concurrent challenges in the neighbourhood with major Asian countries as well as with other global powers. All these concerns have to be pursued with seamless diligence. Each is prioritised as needed at a particular juncture. Within this complex matrix, handling relations with China is clearly our biggest challenge. It is marked by parallel elements of hard competition, potential conflict, and, paradoxically, mutually beneficent cooperation; these elements are intertwined.

Given this context, Neighbourhood First has been an excellent concept, vigorously implemented since mid-2014. It has infused a new drive into our relations with most South Asian and South East Asian countries, even though Pakistan remains an outlier. But, we cannot afford to give up on Pakistan, especially our outreach to its non-state as also state actors, although it has been unproductive so far. We have to persist and focus on the logic of economics and public perceptions. It is a long haul, demanding patience without compromising on firmness.

The relationship with China resembles the paradoxical glass that is half-full: What is the dominant element, opportunity or inadequacy? Managing relations with China involves continual balancing, placing actions in context, and always keeping in view the bigger picture.

Two different China narratives dominate our international affairs discourse. One view proclaimed by hard realists is that China is inimically hostile to India and does everything possible to undermine its interests, mobilising South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, to oppose India. These realists also hold the view that China is building an encircling “string of pearls” of naval bases and facilities to dominate the Indian Ocean neighbourhood, and oppose India’s international position, including its bid for membership to the UN Security Council. An alternative view is that India is one of China’s priorities, but not its dominant concern, and that in this particular bilateral relationship, different elements are intermingled: contestation, competition, as also cooperation in mutually beneficial sectors such as economic exchanges. India is one of the few large, profitable Asian investment destinations, and there is a natural fit in the further growth of this relationship. China views India as a potential swing state, in its deeper rivalry with the US and Japan.

Foreign policy must not be managed on the basis of worst-case scenarios. Consequently, India works with China through high-level, multidimensional exchanges, to deepen bilateral ties, and to strengthen cooperation on international issues where it has congruent interests. For example, the two countries pursue a developmental partnership that is built on sharing mutually relevant experience, including an unusual dialogue between Chinese provincial governors and Indian chief ministers.

The unresolved border dispute, which involves Indian and Chinese armed forces in confrontation along the vast border, has been managed with sensitivity on both sides for three decades and longer, despite harsh language used on occasion by the two capitals. The confrontation that began in Doklam on 18 June 2017 on the India–China–Bhutan border was resolved with tactful diplomacy three months later, in a manner acceptable to both China and India. A rising Athens (that is, India) will face many such pressures from an entrenched Sparta (that is, China), in what is called the Thucydides trap. But, this conflict is far from preordained.⁴

For New Delhi, there exist no natural allies among the major powers. It has to adroitly pursue its interests, on the basis of non-exclusive relations, dynamically balancing engagement with all of them, guided by national interest. Our ties with China impinge on virtually each one of our major foreign relations.

Two tracks grossly underdeveloped in India–China relations are people linkages and cultural ties. Sen (2017) provocatively enquires if this relationship “needs to be rescued from the two governments.” The author implies that both sides have failed to build on the available historical foundation that links the two civilisations and peoples. There are enough examples of recent India–China ties. Bollywood films produced a strong impact in China⁵ and a record 20,000 Indian students have gone to China to pursue higher studies, a figure which rises each year. The mutual intellectual discourse offers rich potential; the presence in China of a large body of India specialists and Chinese institutes that study South Asia is not quite matched in India, but Indian study of China is also slowly developing. The two countries also have to deal with mutual public perceptions, which are becoming mutually hostile, although some may say that the image distortions appear sharper in India. Indians are also burdened by the memory of the 1962 war, an event that is not comparable in China, as a trauma or a major public obsession. Mutual confidence-building actions are possible and needed in both countries.

The informal April 2018 summit at Wuhan (which resulted from an Indian initiative) represents fresh thinking. It needs sustained actions that blend firmness and flexibility, responding to possibilities and an ever-shifting international environment. That, too, demands strategic thinking coupled with innovative actions.

Diplomatic Apparatus

The diplomatic apparatus is the nation’s first line of defence, as also its indispensable instrument for attaining external goals. It is the ally of all the state and non-state actors active in international affairs. To achieve India’s goals for a sustainable diplomatic presence, a “whole

of government” and “whole of nation” thinking as well as better resources and management are needed.

The network of diplomatic missions is run by the foreign ministry, but it is owned by the entire country. It is the prime instrument to defend the country’s external interests, act as its first line of security, and deliver on peaceful, offensive objectives working for multiple domestic stakeholders. It is grossly underutilised and, for a variety of reasons, its potential to help home actors, state and non-state is underused. Reaching out to multiple stakeholders would involve better coordination with external partners by the MEA, understanding of what embassy networks can deliver, and building mutual confidence.

On 22 March 2018, the union cabinet agreed to open Indian embassies in 18 African countries over the next four years, taking the total strength of India’s missions from 29 to 47. This move by the Indian foreign office will be reciprocated by Africa’s 45 embassies in India, and will provide India with a diplomatic footprint that matches the country’s politico-economic needs and international standing. Currently, India ranks 11th in a global ranking of diplomatic networks, behind even Spain and Italy, and it should be noted that the rank is not a matter of prestige, but a gauge of real external interests.⁶ A large and persisting capacity constraint is an old issue, which requires in particular a significantly larger diplomatic service. The current effective strength of barely 1,100 diplomat-level executives (800 in the IFS) leaves us short; China has around 7,500 in its diplomatic service, and is miles ahead in its training arrangements. Even Brazil, Mexico and Thailand, with comparable or smaller overseas networks, employ around 2,000 diplomats each. It should also be pointed out that while the Chinese Foreign Ministry has over 20 desk officers working on Indian affairs, the East Asia Division MEA has only four officers, and another two or three officers working out of the policy planning division.

The MEA is grossly underfunded in proportion to its importance and its responsibilities. This hurts our national

interest, as the country's diplomatic apparatus is in a very real sense its first line of defence, a shortfall that amounts to pennies in the national budget (Rana 2017a). Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee flagged this lacuna in budget provisions in 2016 and 2017, but the budget allocations of 2018–19 have seen only a paltry increase. This cannot advance national interests.

The deficits mentioned above are sharpened by a top management capacity blockage, which has become acute in recent years. In essence, the foreign secretary is overburdened with three major concurrent roles. First, the foreign secretary adopts the role of the top policy adviser, used by Prime Ministers as the key ever-in-orbit troubleshooter plus facilitator on all their foreign visits. Second, the foreign secretary also acts as the top executive, managing over a dozen major bilateral relationships with neighbours and major powers. And, finally, the secretary is also the designated head of the IFS cadre, bearing administrative tasks that cannot be delegated to anyone else. The other three secretaries in the MEA, nominally equal in rank to the foreign secretary, are underworked (Katju 2018). Most countries like China, Germany, Russia and the US distribute these tasks among two or more civil service heads. In those countries which have a single official, the head seldom travels abroad (France and UK). Moreover, these countries carry out a rigorous delegation, using a political affairs director to share the policy burden, and the single head can then focus on systemic and human resource management. The net result in the MEA is that the diplomatic system management suffers because of dependence on one position. One simple solution is to treat economic relations (now consisting of five major divisions) as a full department in a quasi-autonomous role. The other two secretaries also need better role definition and responsibilities.

Equally, the entire external affairs network needs renewal, reform and rejuvenation. The main task is incremental reform across a broad front. Among others, this should cover the new push on career-long professional training

(for example, ambassador training, using annual conferences for experience sharing, and developing best practices), deeper human resource management reform, and the installation of a full-scope intranet.⁷ No less vital is a real push on economic diplomacy, made all the more important because some of our embassies are rather overwhelmed by political tasks. Both economic and political moves are essential, but economic work tends to be left to discretionary actions by ambassadors. That brings us back to the importance of stronger and holistic performance management monitoring.

Way Forward

Overall, the MEA and the IFS officers have done well, when compared with their peers. One only has to look at their international reputation to confirm their performance. However, they possess the potential to deliver more. Despite expansion in the annual intake of IFS officers to around 35 (from a pre-2007 average of 10), the quality remains outstanding, as also the work ethic among young officials. But, even good systems need improvement and, therefore, we should be more self-critical and exigent. A master plan to examine and deliver on the kind of issues identified above—which is an incomplete list since it is one person's perspective—has become imperative.

NOTES

- 1 Another reform exercise was undertaken in the early 1980s, but the ensuing Samar Sen report of 1983 has remained unpublished, though J N Dixit (2005) disclosed its main conclusions in his final book, *Indian Foreign Service: History and Challenge*. This report was underwhelming in its recommendations.
- 2 An extract from Rana (2013b: Chapter 4). The limited result in the case of Germany has been due to the fact that the instructions issued to its ambassadors come only from the Foreign Office and not as "whole of government" action, as with France.
- 3 Some countries, like Kenya, call these country brand boards. In essence, they bring together state agencies and non-official actors, covering the academia, the media, tourism agencies and others, in projecting abroad the country's public image.
- 4 We witness some recent evolution in Indian strategic thinking. See, Raja Mohan (2018).
- 5 In 2017, Indian films *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* earned \$193 m and \$117 m, respectively, in China, which were among the highest sums earned by foreign films in that country. See Bloomberg (2018).
- 6 See the Lowy Diplomacy Index: <https://globaldiplomacyindex.loyyinstitute.org/>.

- 7 Evidently, security concerns inhibit action on this. We ignore that fact that such virtual private networks are standard in most foreign ministries and other sensitive institutions around the world.

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