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Ensuring that the MEA delivers

Comprehensive diplomatic goals, broken down into action plans for embassies, needed

Setting out the strategic objectives of foreign policy is the first step in a process that leads to actionable goals for embassies and consulates, and provides templates for performance evaluation, improving results across the board. Logically, that superstructure of desirable outcomes demands a foundation, a master list of what we want from our diplomatic engagement. It is not sufficient to say that these foreign policy objectives are obvious, and ‘known to all’.

Consider how other foreign ministries organize what is a typical three-level matrix, consisting of objectives-goals-targets. The **UK** was a pioneer, thanks to Margret Thatcher’s push for improved results from public services. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has published a series of banal-sounding two-year reports on ‘Government Expenditure Plans’, commencing in the late 1990s. Its latest iteration is an ‘FCO Single Department Plan: 2025-2020’ published in February 2016. The ‘Objectives’ at the first level are now distilled into three: ‘protect our people, project our global influence, promote our prosperity’. Below each are several ‘Priorities’, and at the third level, each of these subdivides into a series of goals. Underpinning all this is also an imperative: ‘Delivering efficiently in FCO’, laying out steps to reduce costs, and work collaboratively across government. We may assume that behind this public document are elaborations, for FCO departments, embassies and other agencies, specifying actions that each of them must pursue.

The foreign ministries of Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the US, among others, publish similar three-level goal-setting documents. The **US** State Department, jointly with US Aid, offers a Strategic Plan covering 2014-17 that sets out five ‘strategic goals’. **Canada** publishes an annual Department Plan (as all government agencies are required to do), setting out four ‘priorities’; an innovative feature is that under each, the ‘key risks’ are elaborated together with the responses to each risk, besides the usual detailing of the priorities. The **Ireland** Foreign Ministry has a succinct 13-page ‘Statement of Strategy 2015-17’ calling its three levels: ‘goals, outcomes and priority outputs’. **New Zealand**

offers a ‘Strategic Results Framework’ that sets out long-term and medium term outcomes and direct result indicators.

Some elements are common to all these documents. First, because diplomatic objectives are for the great part not quantifiable, what are presented are narrative descriptions of the desired results. Second, the focus is not on the number of ministerial visits or business delegations, (which can be described as ‘process’, and should not figure in performance accounting), but rather on outcomes, even if captured through words. Third, one purpose is reporting to home publics, on the premise that foreign affairs management is a public good; the foreign ministry acts in line with other government agencies, all of which must furnish such accounting. Fourth, behind these open narratives are internal documents, elaborating actions at unit or operational level. For example, Canada and the UK (and perhaps some others as well), follow ‘key performance indicators’ (KPIs), borrowed from the corporate world, where operational actions are cascaded down to units (embassies and consulates), and even to individual officials. Some elaborate these with ‘performance contracts’ that senior officials are required to sign. Based on discussion at African foreign ministries that use such KPIs, I am skeptical about their utility in typical diplomatic environments; UK’s House of Commons committees and others have called this an excess of ‘managerialism’, but perhaps it delivers some value nevertheless. Fifth, even if performance contracts are not used, goal setting infuses objectivity into annual assessments of officials.

Where does the Indian MEA stand in all this? For some years now our ministries publish ‘outcome budgets’ – MEA’s 2016-17 document runs to nearly 400 pages, with an abundance of detail, but lacking clear goals and prioritization that would bring order to the narrative. The reader is immersed in detail, without such a master template. Clearly, in some areas MEA’s performance has been outstanding: quality of passport and consular service delivery has risen sharply; digital diplomacy shines in global comparisons; and the ‘Development Partnership Administration’ established in 2012 as MEA’s overarching aid delivery system has learnt continually, innovative in both concept and project implementation. Examples: widening recruitment to bring in aid management specialists; the ‘de-centralized’ Tamil housing project in Sri Lanka (*Business Standard*, ‘India’s Aid Diplomacy’, 13 May 2013); new cooperation project bidding arrangements. Gradual, undramatic pursuit of reform has worked well.

Since 1981, MEA’s embassies prepare annual plans, but these hang in a vacuum, without an ecosystem of master objectives that ought to flow across the system. Not all embassies prepare these plans, and are seldom held to account; the process is treated as a proforma exercise. On the plus side, some colleagues show interest in performance improvement through applying ideas developed elsewhere, such as the French system of setting unified, custom-designed objectives for ambassadors, to be implemented during their typical three-year tenure, but this

too demands the underpinning of a global hierarchy of tasks that the system ought to accomplish.

Among all the foreign ministry actions, a direct contributor to national goals is economic promotion: i.e. trade enhancement, investment mobilization, aid management, technical assistance, tourism, and help with drawing up and negotiating economic framework agreements, bilateral and regional. Each is vital, but consider the most important for embassies can be export promotion, and FDI mobilization. Unlike other countries, India has no separate offices abroad for these three activities; embassies are the action hubs. Consider: different ideas are afloat on ways to energize India's exports, which have been stagnant for some years; in the figures just released for 2016-17 commodity exports show modest growth of 4.7% to \$274.5 billion, after some years of stagnation; much more is needed. Jayanta Roy recently suggested creating an empowered trade negotiator, ('India's looming BoP challenge' *Business Standard*, 12 February 2017). An easier solution at hand is to energize embassies and task them better with goal setting, implicit in the above recommendations. The same holds for FDI mobilization. Foreign aid management would also gain. Better MEA-economic ministry integration is also needed (see: 'Getting the whole government involved in foreign affairs' *Business Standard*, 14 February 2016).

In sum, a comprehensive framework of diplomatic goals, cascaded down to action plans for embassies and other MEA units, can improve performance across the board. Starting late gives us the advantage of profiting from the experience of others.

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