

ANALYSIS

GOVERNMENT

The MEA's Structural Reforms Are Promising, but Not Sufficient

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Ministry of External Affairs is located in the South Block building. Photo: Wikimedia Commons



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The year 2020 is both euphonic to the ear and a metaphor for perfect eyesight. It is a great launchpad for major actions, serendipitously for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Announced in the first week of February, the MEA has **embarked** upon major reform. This is both timely and welcome.

It is being handled exclusively as an internal process, personally driven by external affairs minister S. Jaishankar. This is, quite literally, the first comprehensive reorganisation in MEA's history. The few details revealed cover MEA's higher management; nearly 60 divisions will be clustered in 'verticals', each headed by one of ten additional secretaries, many in new posts. This is part of a comprehensive process being implemented in the coming weeks and months.

However, there remain issues and areas of reform, like the structure of the ministry, resources – human and material – performance management and operation of embassies which necessitate a deeper examination.

Consider the operational environment confronting foreign ministries (MFAs). Work in today's globalised diplomacy has multiplied exponentially, abroad and at home. Heads of government are peripatetic as never before; issues in global debate have multiplied and are more complex – at regional and bilateral levels. Domestically, MFAs must coordinate intensively with other ministries and agencies, and reach out

to thinktanks, business, the media and a host of other non-state actors.

The MEA starts with real assets: a lean structure; a cadre of dedicated officials; an ethos of excellence, and consistently strong leadership. Its peers view it as one of the most effective diplomatic systems. The challenge is to optimise performance across the board, and get the best out of its human resources.

Also read: [A Visual Guide to the External Affairs Ministry's Share of the Budget 2020 Pie](#)

Structure

Appointing 10 additional secretaries (redesignated as 'political directors') creates a new senior management layer across the ministry, but does not really address the top management challenges at the MEA. Plainly put, the work distribution between the foreign secretary and the other three secretaries is skewed, and leaves the former heavily overloaded. Vivek Katju who retired as an MEA Secretary **wrote about** this in 2013:

“The Foreign Secretary is the administrator of the foreign office and also handles critical bilateral relationships as well as multilateral work...All this work leaves him no time to plan and execute a vision for the foreign office or the IFS.”

PM Modi's welcome personal engagement in foreign affairs has further multiplied the foreign secretary's work; simply put, the urgent overtakes the important. He needs a 'political director', to help manage the divisions under his direct charge. And at the bottom of the pyramid, there is scope for entrusting more responsibility to desk officers, the undersecretaries.



S. Jaishankar. Photo: PTI/Ravi Choudhary

MEA's economic divisions total about seven, including the units that constitute the 'Development Partnership Administration' (DPA) created in 2012, a splendid initiative that manages Indian foreign aid. In any other ministry that would be a separate 'department'. Hiving it off in this manner would improve its focus and credibility with other economic ministries and departments, and add to MEA's stature. Such a move would retain the foreign secretary's overall primary role in the MEA, while lightening his direct load.

Human resources

The sanctioned strength of the Indian Foreign Service is 960; in March 2019 the actual strength was 795, and the current figure is perhaps around 820. If we add to this those in Grade I of 'IFS B' (who hold diplomatic rank), the total is around 1050. Taken together with the commerce department officials assigned to embassies and experts sent on contract assignments (e.g. for aid projects), the number approaches 1200. That is a low figure for a diplomatic system that extends to 123 embassies, but the steady increase implemented 2007 onwards (by expanding the annual intake to around 35) is working well. We are better off with a lean system.

The challenge is in HR management, especially to apply greater selectivity for promotion to the top grades, and in training. Clearly, ‘merit-based promotions’ cannot work in the Indian ethos; that would surely lead to partisan manipulation. But even with promotions handled through sequentially taking up a full annual batch (as is our civil service custom), those judged to be inadequate performers should be left out, especially for the rank of joint secretaries and upwards.

Also read: [How Consistent Has Our Diplomacy Been in Pursuit of Economic Objectives?](#)

The IFS also has to abandon the bizarre practice under which a person not promoted with that batch, if promoted a year or two later gets back the original seniority; that is not equitable, and we can learn from the armed forces.

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has done well in cutting back the duration of entry-level training, but needs to add ambassador and senior management training courses, going beyond the mandatory pre-promotion training courses that the Manmohan Singh government introduced across all civil services in 2008. And MEA’s top management needs to devote attention to the training function, to supervise better FSI’s working.

As for financial shortages facing the MEA, the parliamentary committee headed by Shashi Tharoor has [written eloquently](#) on the issue. It criticised the MEA’s ‘failure to convince Ministry of Finance for higher allocation in consonance with the ever increasing foreign policy mandate...(and) the mismatch in demand and allocation and further recurrent budgetary cuts imposed by the Ministry of Finance at all stages of budgetary allocation’. The real problem: the finance establishment fails to envision the diplomatic system as the country’s first line

of defence. This problem has persisted with the Union Budget announced on 1 February 2020.

Resource shortage cripples the system.

Performance management

Foreign ministries traditionally don't broadcast their work methods, but material emerges from reform plans, such as UK's **Future FCO**, 2016, and a 2014 report **Modernising Dutch Diplomacy**. Canadian diplomat Darryl Copeland's **Guerilla Diplomacy** is especially insightful. Broadly, three methods are used: annual action plans (Australia, New Zealand, US); 'ambassador's instructions' (France, Italy, Germany); 'Key Performance Indicators', or 'KPIs' as known in the corporate world (China, UK and several African and European countries).

The MEA nominally uses annual plans, but more than half our embassies do not bother, and since Rajiv Gandhi's days, no one at MEA monitors these. It is not difficult to apply one of the above methods; perhaps some action on this is now in the pipeline.



Photot: PTI

The oldest performance supervision is inspections of embassies, used with other methods by major diplomatic services; the US and Canada even publish major parts of their embassy reports. We use this, but five or more years may pass before a set of inspectors lands up at a typical Indian embassy.

Also read: Will Shashi Tharoor's Recommendations Reform the MEA for the Better?

The Germans have the most rigorous system, supplemented by parallel internet-based annual feedback from all home-based personnel, security guards upwards; it is especially effective in spotting emerging staff crisis, plus guiding ambassadors to improve embassy management, avoiding financial lapses. Even in our age of instant global communication, this remains a critical challenge for all countries. We cannot afford **laxity**.

Process and methods: Listed below are some of many actions that are feasible and should be a priority.

- Breaking silos: EAM Jaishankar has spoken persuasively of his commitment to breaking a silo mentality and engaging with other domestic ministries to advance the MEA's external economic agenda. For example, major and minor Indian aid projects, including those in our vital neighbourhood, **Myanmar**, Nepal or elsewhere, languish years beyond their deadlines, because other ministries don't see them as vital. The MEA also finds it hard to harmonise actions with the economic ministries; an MEA 'economic department' can be advantageous here. Other ministries often fail to use the Indian embassy networks to advance their agendas.
- Outreach to non-state actors: Why doesn't a forum for thinktanks, for regular, structured dialogue, and a

similar forum for economic diplomacy (involving industry and commerce chambers and leading businessmen), exist? We have been inhibited for too long when it comes to initiating sustained conversations with such key domestic actors.

- **Public diplomacy:** After establishing a Public Diplomacy (PD) Division in 2006, some years later this was folded into the External Publicity Division, headed by a joint secretary who also has his hands as full as the MEA's 'Official Spokesman'. Public communication is a good 'vertical' that can be headed by an additional secretary, who remains the spokesman, overseeing two divisions, i.e. the traditional external publicity and the mainly internet-driven public diplomacy unit. This is one area in which MEA's performance has been outstanding, despite a minuscule \$5 million PD budget.
- **A comprehensive 'intranet':** Fear of snooping by other countries has inhibited us from establishing a fullscale intranet of the kind long common in most major diplomatic systems, also used widely across our own government, including the intelligence services and the armed forces. Global distribution of diplomatic missions makes this all the more vital; other countries deploy secure conferencing as well as political and administrative networking, at a level that traditional communication does not permit. For instance, the US State Department's 'diplopedia', used to refine work templates via 'crowdsourcing'; UK's FCO interviews shortlisted candidates, for every single assignment third secretary upwards.

Also read: [Diplomacy in the Age of Social Media](#)

- **Forward planning:** As a few others have done, it would pay to identify some 30-odd bilateral priority countries and map out where we can take each relationship over the next 5 years, in political, economic and other sectors. This can be blended with identification each year of two or three countries for special cultivation – doing this jointly with, for instance, the Departments of Commerce and Industrial Promotion. Ambassadors in countries that are at the periphery of our priorities can also be encouraged to come up with innovative ideas, be it via ITEC cooperation, promotion of new trade products or bringing foreign students. Planning is integral to improved performance.

Embassies: Our official agencies view the current network of 123 embassies and around 40 plus consulates as belonging to one ministry. True, the MEA directly controls them, but it belongs to all Indian agencies and is also answerable to the public. It is not just the economic ministries that need to make better use of a network, that should better serve all manner of entities that have a vocation and requirement for external connections. Consular and diaspora work has become a vital connector with publics. Should we not have a ‘citizen charter’ for the services that this network can provide?

Offered here is an incomplete catalogue of MEA reforms that lie in the domain of the possible, the practical. EAM Jaishanker is to be complimented for initiating a broad reform process. It is best that remains an in-house, initiative, undertaken incrementally. Yet, wider discussion might furnish ideas, to help this process.

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