

Why India needs smart diplomacy

Foreign ministries typically seldom enjoy a support constituency in the home country. When the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) performs well in a crisis, as during the evacuation of stranded Indians in Libya or Yemen in times of local conflict, it wins kudos, but public memory is short. Business associations that benefit from export or investment promotion actions by embassies are appreciative, but they know well that MEA has no capacity to give them what they seek, tax benefits or reworked regulations, for which they turn to the economic ministries. Equally, the media know well that bad news sells, and their default setting on foreign affairs is one of skepticism towards the *sarkari* establishment. It was perhaps during a 1982 Falklands debate in the British Parliament that someone said of the Foreign Office, tongue-in-cheek: it looks after the interests of foreigners.

Shashi Tharoor, as chairman of the Parliament's Standing Committee on External Affairs recently reverted to an issue that his committee had flagged in its May 2016 report, i.e. a major increase in MEA's budget allocation. Tharoor emphasized that in 2015-16, the ministry had sought Rs.22,967 crore (\$3.428 billion) but the actual allocation was a mere Rs.14,966 crore (\$2.23 billion). [BS, 19 Feb 2017]. That this committee was not playing party politics is evident from the rationale provided, i.e. India's aid commitments and the other real needs of external representation. The 2016 report had stressed that 'with such limited resources that the objectives of India's foreign policy are definitely going to be compromised' at a time when MEA has to manage India's expanding international engagement.

In fact, most of Rs.14,966 crore allocation, nearly 80% goes on foreign aid and loans to friendly countries; the total expenditure on 187 Indian missions and posts

abroad is Rs.2265, a mere 15% of the total. Yet, this is the cutting edge of Indian diplomacy. Restricting funds to MEA has several consequences.

First, the implementation of foreign aid project suffers. Staggered release of funds may appear a temporizing solution to a finance ministry that must navigate its path amidst different domestic political imperatives, but delayed execution undermines the very logic of foreign aid. As a 7 June 2016 editorial in this paper said: ‘Plans to build a port for Sri Lanka and a pipeline for natural gas for Myanmar were mooted and then delayed or rejected; in both cases the PRC stepped in...Even worse is the situation of the infrastructure connecting India’s Northeast to Myanmar’s Sitwe port, which is long behind schedule because New Delhi has been tardy in fulfilling its responsibilities.’ Stories of delayed projects in other regions, be it Central Asia or Africa are legend, which seriously undermines Indian credibility.

Second, a budget squeeze impinges largely on promotional actions, be it for exports, investments or tourism inflows. In the Indian system, it is the embassies that handle most of this work, because we have few tourism promotion offices abroad, and none for investment mobilization (remember, a small network of India Investment Centers was closed in the 1990s when it became evident that they were ineffective). Most embassies are on the ball, and work assiduously as a one-stop point for all manner of actions to advance national interests, as studies have shown. But they need a minimum quantum of wherewithal, for organizing business seminars, visits to interior regions of their assignment country to connect with local enterprises, and to assist delegations to and from India.

Third, consular work and connecting with oversea Indian communities has risen to the to the top of the diplomacy agenda. That too involves local travel and cultivation of all manner contacts, all of which suffers when a lack of funds confines embassy officials to their offices, limited to a simplistic ‘flying the flag’ role.

Simply put, in a globalized, interconnected world, embassies and consulates are the country's first line of defence, safeguarding and advancing national interests, proactively building relationships with foreign countries that enrich mutual contacts across a broad front. This is a permanent, continuous task. I am reminded of other countries, such as Canada, where some years back foreign affairs became a low priority, prompting Daryl Copeland to write a scathing defence of diplomacy in his book *Guerilla Diplomacy* (2009). Such situations arise when a narrow view of security gains dominance. Real security comes from building networks of friendship, founded on shared interests, and that demands sustained cultivation of foreign states, both neighbors and those located afar.

Recent welcome change at MEA includes bringing in bright young 18 interns, and 20-odd researchers. This counters an old 'closed box' image. But MEA also needs to bite the bullet. It can practice lean diplomacy in different ways. One is to cut back further on home-based support staff in embassies. Kenya saved enough money in the 2000s to fund the opening of seven new embassies by drastically cutting back on support staff. For example, it is not enough to eliminate personal assistants for junior officials as we have done. The UK now provides home-based PAs only to its most senior ambassadors, on the premise that most work in embassies is open, and locally engaged staff – who cost a fraction of home-based personnel – can handle much of the work. For the really confidential stuff, computers are the ubiquitous allies for all. Other cost saving is possible. A few years back the Canadian embassy in Beijing eliminated its staff-cars, except for the ambassador and his deputy, on the premise that taxis are almost as convenient and much cheaper. Further, the notion that every official vehicle must have a chauffeur makes little sense at places where everyone drives their own cars; middle ranking Chinese diplomats now drive their official cars. And consider, does first class air travel for all Indian ambassadors make sense, in an age when most rich states find that business class is good enough?

When a diplomatic system is crippled with severe budget cutbacks, it tends to become a hollow shell. We are far from such a situation in India. But there is no gainsaying that proactive external engagement for a rising India demands more resources.

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