

# THE HINDU Business Line

## Challenging times for the MEA

BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN



*THE HINDU* Foreign policy has to be integrated and coordinated with overall national strategic policy.

*The MEA has to face up to India's increasing global profile. At present, it lacks a formal strategic planning structure. Since coalition governments are here to stay, there is a need to forge a consensus over major foreign policy priorities.*

Major changes are taking place in the top-level bureaucracy of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Apart from the change in Foreign Secretary, the key top-level posts of two Secretaries dealing with the East and West are changing hands, and there are changes in leadership of missions to key countries such as the US, France, the UK, and Russia.

At the same time a major expansion in personnel, raising the strength of the Foreign Service by 50 per cent, is underway. The MEA is facing numerous challenges arising from the increasing profile of India.

While there is change, there is also a degree of continuity. In the case of the US, the continuity is particularly clear as the next Ambassador will be the former Foreign Secretary, Ms Nirupama Rao, who has been a key player in managing the relationship for the past two years. This relationship is set to grow across many sectors, and enjoys sustained public support, despite occasional irritants.

The expansion in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) cadre from its present level of around 500 is long overdue, given the fact that the IFS is relatively small, compared to competitor countries.

### Training, projects

However, mere increase in staff strength is only part of the process. Efficient and sensible personnel management is needed to make the best use of human resources. The system of postings and transfers should make good use of the skills and experience of personnel. A new promotion policy is under way, keeping in view the need for good career management.

India's economic cooperation and technical assistance has grown in volume and geographical spread. Large credit lines have been made available. These require efficient project management, monitoring and evaluation so that the funds are put to good use. A bad project is not only a waste of resources, but can also be an unpleasant reminder in bilateral relations.

Given the Government's poor record in developing, approving and implementing projects, it would be wise to concentrate on smaller high-impact projects in the HR and IT services sectors rather than ambitious large infrastructure or industrial projects. The move to set up a separate agency for economic assistance is overdue, and has been recommended by advisory committees over 10 years ago.

### Strategic planning

A more difficult issue is one of strategic planning. Most organisations and several foreign ministries have a strong strategic planning unit located close to the CEO. The MEA lacks a formal strategic planning structure though, informally, its Committee of Secretaries with some Joint Secretaries may serve this purpose to some extent.

In this situation the focus of strategy and policymaking has shifted more and more to the PMO and the NSA, which are already overburdened with urgent issues. This results in the absence of long-term policy coherence and continuity and leads to ad hoc situations and event-driven responses. Many of our Missions lack clear-cut directions on what they are supposed to work towards and achieve, leaving heads of missions to define this themselves. In today's world, a good strategic planning set-up is essential if personnel and resources are to be efficiently used to

achieve clear objectives.

Who is to set these strategic objectives? This is clearly the responsibility of the political leadership. Recall the times of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and even P.V. Narasimha Rao, when foreign policy objectives bore their decisive imprint. Foreign policy has to be integrated and coordinated with overall national strategic policy at the top level so that it supports the achievement of defined objectives.

Apart from such burning issues as relations with Pakistan, China, the US and Russia, foreign policy does not seem to command enough attention of the top political leadership, except on specific occasion such as high-level visits or summits. This leaves the MEA, to some extent, without direction and political support.

Many foreign interlocutors have commented that India should be more active on the global stage, commensurate with its growing economic strength. Indeed, comparison with China would indicate that India pays relatively less high-level attention to most countries, apart from the G-8.

Even among its neighbours, India tends to concentrate too much on Pakistan and China, paying less attention to important neighbours such as Bangladesh. To be more active, one must have a vision and strategic direction.

## Policy priorities

Given the fact that India will continue to have coalition governments in the foreseeable future, there is need for a platform to forge political consensus over major foreign policy priorities. The political divergences over foreign policy are particularly debilitating when it comes to such neighbouring states as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and South-East Asia have emerged as important areas in our extended neighbourhood. But relations with these regions are managed by one of the Secretaries and a Minister of State. Visits by the PM or the Minister to these countries are relatively rare and there is an imbalance in high-level visits.

In contrast, China sends high-level dignitaries more often. This tends to convey an impression of lower priority, which needs to be addressed. A posting to an African country is not seen as a career plus for an officer, and such assignments tend to be avoided. Other areas such as Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe (minus the big four) seem to be peripheral in the MEA's priorities.

Even as MEA goes through its cyclic personnel changes, the challenges before it are great. Examples are the winding down of US presence in Afghanistan, the troubled relationship with Pakistan and China, the complications of India's civil and strategic nuclear roles, the pursuit of an enhanced role in the UN system, to name only a few.

While addressing these challenges, the MEA must be able to pay adequate attention to many other issues as part of its overall strategic planning.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece. [blfeedback@thehindu.co.in](mailto:blfeedback@thehindu.co.in))

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