

## Chapter 14

# Traditions and Institutions

**A**lthough the Indian civilization is old, the Indian nation is young. Ironically, it is India's experience under colonial rule that created the idea of India as a modern nation. Macaulay's educational reforms were intended to create an Indian elite who, cut off from the deep roots of their own rich heritage of culture and achievements, would become loyal subjects of the British Empire. Macaulay's strategy did succeed, perhaps more than he envisaged. An unintended outcome of educating Indians was the rise of Indian nationalism. The Indian elite educated in the Western mould drew inspiration from the great ideas of nationalism, communism and socialism that were sweeping across Europe in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. There were also warning lessons to be learnt from the fascist tendencies in Germany and Italy.

### Influence of Nehru and Gandhi

Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India's first Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs, played the main role in shaping India's foreign policy. Nehru's understanding of history and knowledge of foreign affairs was unmatched among independent India's first generation of leaders. His Western education and personal familiarity with different European political movements and trends deeply influenced his thinking and gave

him a valuable grounding in foreign affairs. Even before India became independent, he had deeply reflected on important foreign policy matters and had a clear farsighted vision for an Independent India. It was only natural, therefore, that his ideas and theories provided the crucial inputs and guidance for India's foreign policy when India became independent.

Alongside Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi's thinking and philosophy had a significant, although insufficiently appreciated, influence on India's foreign policy. The essential elements of Gandhi's philosophy were the concepts of non-violence, the importance of the moral dimension in the conduct of men as well as nations, and *Satyagraha* or the struggle for truth, compassion and justice. Gandhi's thinking was influenced by the moral, ethical and philosophical precepts of Indian holy books and scriptures like the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as the teachings of Lord Buddha. At a conceptual and intellectual level, India's freedom struggle was not just about gaining India's freedom from British rule, but part of a wider global anti-colonial movement. This internationalist aspect of India's movement for independence emanated from Gandhi's own encounters with racism in South Africa, which contributed to the understanding among Congress leaders that India's own freedom was linked to that of people suffering under colonial rule elsewhere in the world.

It is therefore hardly surprising that from the very beginning, India's foreign policy concerned itself not only with India's narrow national interests, but also how it would impact other colonies in Asia and Africa. The defining characteristics of India's foreign policy in the first few decades after India's independence were: non-alignment, or the right to follow an independent foreign policy and to decide foreign policy issues on merit; moral, diplomatic and economic support for the struggle against colonialism, racialism, apartheid and other forms of discrimination; non-violence and the quest for nuclear disarmament and India's role as an international peacemaker. India's position on world issues was informed by moral clarity and courage, which won India many admirers, made India the leader of the developing countries, and gave it an influence in world affairs out of proportion to its real economic and political

strength. At the same time, India's moralistic posturing as well as its air of self-importance and self-righteousness irritated the Western countries.

The internationalist perspective in India's foreign policy has served India's broader national interests. Would India have survived as a united, sovereign and independent State if it alone had been decolonized? Undoubtedly, the spread of the movement against colonialism and racism, leading to the emergence of large numbers of independent countries, buttressed India's own independence. The pride and self-respect that Gandhi engendered among the people of India gave India the moral courage to stand up and follow an independent foreign policy rather than submit to pressures to join one of the Cold War blocs. This has stood India well. It has consistently remained a defining feature of India's foreign policy for over six decades. So deep-rooted and widespread is the conviction that an independent foreign policy is the right policy for India to follow that no Government in India can openly call for any change in approach.

India's foreign policy institutions and traditions necessarily carry the stamp of Jawaharlal Nehru, who conceptualized and executed India's foreign policy for the first 17 years after India's independence. No less important is the fact that he trained and inspired a generation of Indian diplomats who shaped India's foreign policy during the remaining part of the 20th century. Under Nehru, India strutted on the world stage. Its lofty voice was a standing feature of important international gatherings. In India's diplomatic traditions, multilateral diplomacy acquired an aura that was denied to hardcore bilateral diplomacy. Indian diplomats became experts in trying to work out compromise positions than to playing hardball to preserve and promote India's national interests. Diplomats gave more attention to elegant formulations on paper than to the substantive outcome of negotiations.

Nehru's foreign policy style was personalized. He remained his own Minister of External Affairs, interacting directly with the officials of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), at the head of which was the unique, newly created post of Secretary General. The Cabinet as a whole did not exert much influence

on foreign policy. Just one Minister, Defence Minister Krishna Menon, shared Nehru's burden of guiding foreign and defence policy. As the Indian Foreign Service was very new, India had no trained and experienced professional diplomats who could advise Nehru. Nehru's political interaction was extensive, but his approach was explanatory and exhortatory, not open-minded. His utterances and writings—speeches in Parliament, letters to the Chief Ministers, statements during his visits abroad and when dignitaries visited India—were long and rambling, combining considerable practical wisdom with theoretical and philosophical musings. At times he was naïve and unrealistic. It is very likely that if the thinking represented by revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Veer Savarkar and Subhash Chandra Bose or even of Sardar Patel had had greater influence on India's Gandhi-inspired and Nehru-directed foreign policy, it would have been imbued with a greater dose of realpolitik.

The personalized conduct of foreign policy is one of Nehru's enduring legacies. Nehru's personal rapport with many of the world's leaders was undoubtedly genuine and sometimes effective, but it meant that insufficient attention was paid to the development of institutions for the conduct of foreign policy. Subsequent Indian leaders have similarly tried to conduct Indian foreign policy on a personalized basis. To this day, Indian leaders delude themselves that foreign policy successes, both real and imagined, are due to a magical 'personal rapport' they enjoy with foreign leaders.

### **Post-Nehru Evolution**

Lal Bahadur Shastri was in office for too short a period to make any meaningful contribution to the development of foreign policy institutions. Indira Gandhi continued the personalized approach of her father, and made the dubious contribution of undermining the weak foreign policy institutions she had inherited. Her approach was informed by two factors, namely the Bangladesh crisis of 1971, and her concept of a 'committed' civil service. It was during her time that the

office of the prime minister became a source of enormous power. In foreign policy, she exercised control through her Principal Secretary, P.N. Haksar, who was originally from the Indian Foreign Service, and D.P. Dhar, Chairman of a newly set up and extremely powerful Policy Planning Committee in the MEA. Bypassing the Minister of External Affairs of the day, Dhar oversaw the Bangladesh operations and relations with the Soviet Union. Personalized decision-making cost India dearly in the 1972 Shimla Agreement, where Indira Gandhi relied on her personal instincts and close advisers rather than impartial professional advice to cut an unsatisfactory deal with Pakistan's Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The position of the Chairman, Policy Planning Committee was subsequently dismantled, only to be revived during Indira Gandhi's second term of office when G. Parthasarathi, another loyalist, was appointed to this post.

Rajiv Gandhi too had an imperious style. In foreign affairs, he relied less on the established institutional structures and chain of command, and more on the officials in his own office. During his tenure, the Prime Minister's Office became unprecedentedly powerful, with middle level officials exercising power that far exceeded their formal position in the bureaucratic hierarchy. At times, Rajiv Gandhi himself held the office of Minister of External Affairs. When he did not, he made sure that the incumbent did not step out of line. The role and the importance of the MEA was greatly reduced, its established hierarchies disrupted. If Rajiv Gandhi's most blatant move was to give effective responsibility for certain aspects of foreign policy to the Secretary of a Ministry (Information and Broadcasting) that had nothing to do with foreign policy, his most cavalier one, with tragic long-term consequences, was the public sacking of the Foreign Secretary in 1987.

Sonia Gandhi, the Chairperson of the UPA, has continued the Nehru-Gandhi legacy of personalized foreign policy formulation and execution. 'Loyalty' to the Nehru-Gandhi family is the watchword. In Nehru's time, it is understandable that many public figures should have been appointed as Heads of Mission to important world capitals both as political patronage and in view of the fact that there were not enough

suitably qualified senior career officers who could fit the bill. All subsequent prime ministers, including Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, were content to let career diplomats man most of the crucial posts abroad. The UPA Government, however, has shown itself to be egregiously prone to cronyism.

### **Policy Formulation—Structures and Influences**

One difficulty in institutionalizing foreign policy in any country is that the chief executive of the government, the prime minister in India's case, necessarily has to get intimately involved in foreign policy matters. As India's standing in the world has improved, so have the visibility and the international commitments of its Prime Minister. This makes the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Minister of External Affairs a delicate one, particularly if the External Affairs Minister is a political heavyweight. However, it is in the very nature of things that it is the Prime Minister, particularly one experienced and interested in foreign affairs, who ultimately determines the extent of leeway and freedom of action given to the Minister of External Affairs.

India's experience has been that prime ministers belonging to the Congress Party, whether from the Nehru–Gandhi family or not, have exercised more decisive control of foreign policy than non-Congress prime ministers. P.V. Narasimha Rao, who had earlier served as Minister of External Affairs, gave a definite strategic direction to India's foreign policy in the early 1990s. For a person who had neither any previous experience nor any known interest in foreign affairs, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been surprisingly assertive— and controversial. This is seen in his single-minded keenness, almost obsession, with the India–US nuclear deal, for the sake of which he not only kept the post of Minister of External Affairs with himself for nearly a year, but also staked the future of his government. Even after a very senior and experienced minister, Pranab Mukherjee, was appointed Minister of External Affairs, the overall control of the relationship with the US remains with the

Prime Minister. The new phenomenon in the UPA Government has been the influence, often decisive, of players who are not formally part of the government. These include the Chairperson of the UPA and parties like the Left and the Samajwadi Party, on whom the government relies for support.

On the other hand, non-Congress prime ministers have tended to give a little more slack to the ministers of External Affairs. During Morarji Desai's tenure as Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a powerful Foreign Minister. Similarly, during the governments of V.P. Singh and H.D. Devegowda, I.K. Gujral effectively ran foreign policy. As Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee concerned himself only with the broad strategic vision and was content to give External Affairs Ministers Jaswant Singh and Yashwant Sinha a relatively free hand in foreign policy.

The most important institutional mechanism for the Prime Minister is to exercise control over his own office. Since the time of Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister's Office, whose foreign affairs component has vastly expanded, exercises more direct control over foreign policy. From 1998 onwards, the National Security Adviser (NSA), who has unrestricted access to the Prime Minister, supervises matters relating to foreign affairs in the Prime Minister's Office. He also controls and coordinates work relating to the Ministries of Defence, Home, Space, Atomic Energy, as well as the various intelligence agencies. Currently two Deputy NSAs, at least a couple of Foreign Service officers in the Prime Minister's Office, as well as a full-fledged dedicated National Security Council Secretariat assist him in this task. In this way, the NSA has emerged as a very powerful figure behind the scenes on foreign policy issues, even though he need not necessarily have any background or expertise in foreign affairs. Unencumbered, on the one hand, by the demands of protocol, of formal meetings with visiting dignitaries, of public appearances, of Parliament and political work, and armed, on the other hand, with information on nuclear, space and intelligence matters to which only the Prime Minister is often privy, the NSA has much more time for, and control over, foreign policy formulation and supervision than the Minister of External Affairs. He also has the advantage that

he is not accountable to either the Parliament or the public—in fact to no one except his political bosses. Thus there is an inbuilt conflict of interest between the NSA and the External Affairs Minister, which has frequently come out in the open since the setting up of the office of the NSA in 1998.

While it is the Prime Minister or the External Affairs Minister who are concerned with the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy, the Indian political structure has institutions to ensure that there is no arbitrariness in the conduct of foreign policy. These are both within the government and through Parliament. In the government, most major foreign policy decisions are taken through deliberations of various committees of the Cabinet, the most important of which, as far as foreign affairs is concerned, is the Cabinet Committee on Security. This Committee, headed by the Prime Minister, has as its members the Home Minister, the Defence Minister, the External Affairs Minister, the Finance Minister and the NSA. Decisions are invariably arrived at by consensus, and in practice the Prime Minister can often steer the outcome of such meetings in the direction he desires. Matters where a wider gamut of political consultations is deemed necessary could be referred to the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs, or the full Cabinet if need be. If a matter is particularly knotty, then it is open for the Prime Minister to set up a smaller informal committee, or a Group of Ministers, to look into the issue in greater detail and report back to the Cabinet Committee on Security or the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs or the Cabinet Committee on WTO matters deliberates over some foreign policy issues with an economic angle, though one problem here is that the Minister of External Affairs is not always a member of these Cabinet committees. Since 2005, in an effort to generate a consensus among key stakeholders and to fast-track decision-making on knotty and controversial issues (in particular FTAs and WTO negotiations) involving India's economic relations with foreign countries, the government has set up a Trade and Economic Relations Committee (TERC), where the key concerned Ministers of External Affairs, Finance, and Commerce and Industry, the Deputy



Chairman of the Planning Commission, the Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council and the Chairman of the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council are members.

Individual Ministers also hold, on an ad hoc basis, smaller meetings with other Cabinet colleagues or senior officials from other ministries/departments. The Minister of Defence, for example, holds weekly or fortnightly meetings in which the Cabinet Secretary, the National Security Adviser, the Chiefs of the Army, Navy and Air Force, the secretaries in the various departments of the Defence Ministry, as well as the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary participate. At the bureaucratic level, issues that involve many ministries and departments are discussed in meetings of the Committee of Secretaries headed by the Cabinet Secretary. This ensures that the inputs from all the relevant ministries/departments are available on any particular issue. The National Security Adviser or the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister sometimes calls meetings on specific issues where the Prime Minister has a special interest. Key secretaries concerned with foreign policy matters in ministries like External Affairs, Home, Defence, Commerce and Finance and Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing also sometimes hold informal meetings to resolve an issue. All these mechanisms are extremely valuable, indeed essential, for harmonizing the positions of different stakeholders in the government before formal decisions are taken by the concerned minister, the Prime Minister or the Cabinet.

There are inbuilt mechanisms, though not all of them work satisfactorily, for parliamentary oversight of foreign policy too. The Standing Committee of Parliament for the MEA that includes Members of Parliament from different parties meets twice or thrice a year. The Foreign Secretary, assisted by his officers, has personally to answer the queries that members may have on the functioning of the MEA. The Standing Committee also examines in detail the MEA budget proposals. Then there is the Consultative Committee of Parliament on External Affairs, where the Minister of External Affairs, assisted by his Ministers of State and senior officials, responds to queries, clarifications and observations made by the Members of Parliament on foreign policy issues. Typically, one issue is

selected for in-depth discussion, but it is open to the members to raise any foreign policy issue of interest or concern to them. Parliamentary oversight is also done through questions raised by Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha. On important issues, the government explains its position in short-duration discussions, longer debates (mostly without voting), *suo moto* statements, responses to calling attention notices, zero hour questions, and so on. Unfortunately, the level of parliamentary interest in foreign affairs has steadily declined, in contrast to the situation a few decades ago. This has weakened parliamentary oversight over foreign affairs, which is a pity, since foreign policy impacts many other areas of governance.

In a parliamentary system of democracy like India's, there is a convention that Parliament does not have to approve or ratify treaties or agreements signed by the government with foreign countries. Such a practice is based on the premise that, as it enjoys majority support in the Lok Sabha, the government has the support of Parliament for its actions in all fields, including foreign policy. However, recently in the case of the India-US nuclear deal this practice has been questioned by both the Left parties, which were supporting the government from outside, as well as by the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party. Their argument has been that on important issues that have long-term consequences for the country the government should not be allowed to take policy decisions without Parliamentary scrutiny and approval. Even though it goes against precedent, a change in the current practice would seem to be desirable in situations where a minority coalition government is in power. This would ensure that foreign policy reflects the prevailing political consensus in India.

The parliamentary systems and procedures that India inherited from the British system have necessarily had to be adapted to the conditions under which Indian democracy functions. One mechanism that has been used from time to time, including in the field of foreign policy, to tackle difficult situations, is the constitution of all-party committees to examine a knotty issue on which there is no national consensus. This was successfully used by former prime minister Vajpayee

on the issue of sending Indian troops to Iraq in 2003. Under great pressure from the US as well as from many within his own party to send troops, Vajpayee instinctively felt that this might not be a good idea, both for his party and for India's national interests. He therefore hit upon the stratagem of convening an all-party Joint Parliamentary Committee to consider the issue, and managed to wriggle out of a difficult situation—in retrospect, an extremely prudent decision. Similarly, although the UPA Government also used such a tactic to postpone the SAARC summit in 2006, it refused to do so on highly controversial and divisive issues such as India's vote in the IAEA on Iran's nuclear programme, as well as on the India–US nuclear deal. In general its preference has been to conduct foreign policy on its own, rather than by trying to build a broad political consensus.

Such an approach is problematic. India has come a long way from Nehru's time when the Congress Party's control of the Central Government and most of the states ensured that there would be no serious dissenting political voices on foreign policy decisions taken by the Central Government. Today, the coalition partners of the Congress are regional parties, whose influence does not extend beyond one or two states and whose perspective on foreign policy is dictated by local considerations and interests rather than a broader national perspective. The same holds true for the Bharatiya Janata Party that led the NDA-coalition of similar regional parties. So far, in the coalition governments they have headed, neither the Congress nor the Bharatiya Janata Party have given up control of the portfolio of the Minister of External Affairs to any other party. This state of affairs may not last forever, and it may become necessary to evolve new mechanisms to deal with a situation where the Minister of External Affairs is a person from a regional party that has a narrow foreign policy perspective.

In practice many foreign policy choices and outcomes are heavily influenced by the predilections of state governments, particularly in respect of neighbouring foreign countries with which they have common borders. As an example, it was only through the intercession of the then Chief Minister of West Bengal that India and Bangladesh could sign the agreement on sharing the Ganga waters. India's Sri Lanka policy continues

to be hobbled by the virtual veto that Tamil Nadu politicians exercise on giving enhanced levels of military assistance to the Sri Lankan government to deal with the LTTE. India's attitude towards Myanmar is dictated in large part by considerations of the development and security of the Northeast states; Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh take a great interest in India's relations with China; while India's policy towards Pakistan is influenced by what Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab think. In short, the states have become important stakeholders in India's foreign policy and therefore have to be treated as such by the government in New Delhi. It is in recognition of this reality that over the last few years the MEA has opened offices in a number of state capitals and the recently set up Public Diplomacy Division has started an outreach programme there.

### **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**

Within the Central Government, the MEA is the principal institution concerned with the conduct of foreign policy. As the administrative head of the MEA, the head of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and the principal foreign policy adviser to the government, the Foreign Secretary wields great power and influence. His position carries considerable prestige and public visibility. Technically, the Foreign Secretary reports to the Minister of External Affairs. But a lot of the Foreign Secretary's work brings him in direct and frequent contact with the Prime Minister. Moreover, it is through the Foreign Secretary that the Prime Minister ensures that his policies are faithfully implemented by the MEA and the vast network of Missions and Posts abroad. Thus, the post of Foreign Secretary is one of the few appointments at the Secretary level in the Government of India where the Prime Minister takes an active interest.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the post of Foreign Secretary has become progressively more politicized and has been frequently mired in controversies, particularly over the last three decades or so. Three Foreign Secretaries have been removed from office before the end of their respective

terms; six have been given extensions in service; and, contrary to the practice in other government organizations and services, on several occasions the Foreign Secretary appointed has superseded several officers. Such cavalier treatment of the office of Foreign Secretary by successive governments, particularly the present UPA Government, has seriously damaged the effective functioning of the MEA, as well as undermined the integrity and cohesiveness of its structure. The Foreign Secretary is required to administer the MEA with fairness, equity and justice. The problem is that a Foreign Secretary who is too beholden to political masters may lack the moral authority, perhaps even the will, to do so.

One severe shortcoming of this larger-than-life role of the Foreign Secretary has been that the MEA, a large sprawling organization with multifarious functions and responsible for the functioning of more than 160 Missions and Posts abroad, is not structured and run in accordance with professional management principles. Decision-making at the top is not collective or consensual, but personalized. Most Foreign Secretaries have functioned like a frenetic one-man band, not an orchestra conductor. They have tended to pursue a personal rather than a well-thought out collective agenda. Trying to keep under their control areas of work that they consider important, or simply to put their stamp on the MEA, Foreign Secretaries have frequently added or given up countries and areas of direct responsibility, whimsically carved up divisions, created new ones, or simply renamed them! The globe in their vision has become like a Swiss cheese, with holes in those places where the Foreign Secretary has chosen to bite! This has also lead to absurd situations where the Foreign Secretary handles relations with France and the United Kingdom (presumably on the ground that they are Permanent Members of the UN Security Council) but not Germany or the European Union! Many Foreign Secretaries have fallen between two stools—unable to give sufficient attention either to the areas under their direct charge, or to the onerous responsibility of supervision and coordination of MEA's functioning.

In addition to the Foreign Secretary, there are two or three other secretaries in the MEA who have their own independent areas of responsibility and report not to the Foreign Secretary

but to the Minister of External Affairs. The position of Secretary is one of considerable prestige and responsibility. Secretaries in MEA give critically important inputs for policy formulation, and are the highest official level negotiators and interlocutors with foreign governments. They are members of the Foreign Service Board and the Departmental Promotion Committee that are entrusted with the responsibility of recommending appointments and promotions at higher levels. Not all Grade I Foreign Service officers are considered suitable for appointment as Secretary in the MEA. A successful tenure as Secretary in the MEA has traditionally been considered an important assignment that has frequently been a stepping-stone to appointment as Foreign Secretary. But the controversial manner in which Foreign Secretaries have been frequently appointed in recent years has regrettably devalued the position of MEA Secretaries, and only reinforced the prevailing mindset among IFS officers that it is better to be an Ambassador abroad in one of the 'important' Embassies rather than be a Secretary or Additional Secretary at headquarters. This can hardly be a satisfactory state of affairs for the Foreign Office of a country like India that has multifarious interests and a presence in all parts of the world and aspires to become a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council.

Successive Foreign Secretaries have to bear much of the responsibility for the progressive devaluation of high-level posts in MEA. The charges, even the designations, of the other Secretaries and Additional Secretaries in the MEA have frequently been changed by the government. Selection of officers for working at headquarters, sometimes even for key assignments, is often arbitrary and personalized, and it is not unusual for officers having no previous experience of the area of work to be entrusted with the position of Head of the Division. Regrettably all too often, some Joint Secretaries, and at times even Secretaries and Additional Secretaries, in the MEA are given ad hoc and rather light responsibilities. Contrary to the practice in the rest of the Government of India, a new practice has been followed in the MEA since the early 1990s whereby the Minister of External Affairs can make appointments of

Additional Secretaries and Joint Secretaries in MEA without the approval of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet. Such tampering with MEA's institutions and traditions has created a skewed organizational structure that breeds frustration and creates inefficiencies.

Unlike the Foreign Offices of other major countries, MEA does not have a large and influential Policy Planning Division that, unburdened by day-to-day tasks and preoccupations, engages in long-term strategic thinking and forecasting by taking a holistic view of foreign policy cutting across various disciplines as well as territorial and functional charges. Given the personalized style of running MEA that has become the norm, it is not surprising that successive Ministers of External Affairs and Foreign Secretaries have shied away from creating a meaningful Policy Planning Division. Meanwhile valuable manpower is kept idle or engaged in divisions having objectively much lesser priority. The Historical and Research Division too has steadily eroded into oblivion. More than six decades after India's Independence there is, sadly, still no established framework of foreign policy planning, and it is left to a handful of politicians and bureaucrats who find themselves in seats of power to take decisions based on their gut feelings and personal prejudices instead of relying on well-reasoned alternatives projected to them by a professional policy planning structure.

One of MEA's fundamental structural flaws is that, for the work expected of it, it is extremely poorly staffed at headquarters and in Missions abroad. The government seems to have finally realized that MEA and Missions/Posts abroad need expansion to take care of India's fast increasing international profile and responsibilities. Problems will, however, remain in the immediate future. It requires considerable lead-time to train officers, and a higher level of recruitment today will take a few years to show any positive effect. Moreover, this increased intake is counterbalanced by the tendency of an increasing number of officers to take early retirement from the government as greener pastures in the private sector or in international organizations lure them away. There are also inherent tendencies within the Indian government that militate

against good management. One is the politically correct urge to cut down posts regardless of objective requirements. Another is bureaucratic inertia.

The pity is that even the meagre human resources that MEA has, are not optimally deployed. MEA's functioning is too Mission-oriented. Normally, the Headquarters to Missions ratio in most Foreign Offices around the world is 1:2, but in the case of the MEA it is more in the range of 1:3 or 1:4. There are just not enough people at Headquarters to process and analyse the information flowing from Missions or Posts abroad as well as from the media and other sources that have proliferated in this information-overload age. Given the speed of communications and the ubiquity of information thanks to the Internet and round-the-clock electronic media, Missions no longer need to spend too much energy on basic reporting of developments. This should have led to some cutting down of staff in Missions abroad and transferring the posts to Headquarters, but in practice the reverse has happened. In personnel management, much more attention is given to selection of personnel for all categories of officers and staff posted in Missions/Posts abroad than to deployments at Headquarters, in which the Minister of External Affairs and the Foreign Secretary enjoy untrammelled discretion and patronage. There is no longer any sanctity about the level of a particular post abroad. A Second Secretary can replace a Counsellor, a Grade III officer a Grade I Head of Mission. The reverse is also true. Such practices tell on morale.

In the allocation of human resources to Missions/Posts abroad, there is a definite bias in favour of the West. All diplomatic and consular posts in Africa and Latin America, and to some extent even in Asia (as well as the divisions in the MEA dealing with these area), are under-staffed compared to the existing quantum and untapped potential of trade, economic and consular work. India does not have senior Ambassadors representing it in the Third World. India has recently opened Missions in small European countries, which objectively occupy a relatively low priority in India's foreign policy. By contrast, it has no or at best poorly-staffed Missions in important but



difficult countries in Africa and Latin America where Indian public and private sector companies have made sizeable investments. In all these countries Indian diplomats need to closely follow internal developments and build relations with the major political players in order to protect India's interests against unexpected political changes.

It is evident that the functioning of MEA, which remains the main branch of the government dealing with foreign policy issues, and India's methods of diplomacy need an urgent review.

### **Other Institutions and Mechanisms**

Increasingly complex foreign policy issues, many of which have far-reaching domestic ramifications, can no longer be handled within the traditional foreign policy framework or in a fragmented and compartmentalized manner. The formulation and conduct of India's foreign policy has to be an integrated national effort using all available institutional and human resources. Within the government, apart from MEA, many other ministries and departments handle foreign policy issues. Ministries like Defence, Finance, Commerce, Overseas Indian Affairs, Water Resources and Petroleum and Natural Gas, just to name a few, play critical roles in foreign policy. There is an urgent need to have an institutionalized and much more efficient coordination mechanism among different branches of the government.

At present there is no efficient mechanism to take full advantage of the considerable talent outside the government for policy formulation. This is regrettable since contemporary foreign policy tasks and challenges before India have become far more complex and demanding, and the government's own resources are not adequate. The only institutional mechanism set up a few years ago is the National Security Advisory Board. Its composition is broad-based, and its members are generally persons of eminence and credibility. So far there is not much evidence that it has provided significant policy inputs, or

that its advice, when given, has been taken seriously by the government. Its most relevant contribution has been the draft Nuclear Doctrine. Thereafter, its importance seems to have declined, and the National Security Advisory Board is used by the government more to give some favoured retired officials, academics and journalists a sinecure than to genuinely use the available expertise and scholarship among non-officials in foreign policy formulation. Another mechanism, used on an ad hoc basis, is that of an Eminent Persons Group, comprising experts from different disciplines, that has been set up with some countries to provide jointly agreed recommendations to both governments for policy formulation. Some prime ministers and ministers of External Affairs have relied on 'Advisers' or 'Special Envoys' to handle specific issues. The Ministries of External Affairs and Defence do support a handful of think tanks, and sometimes contract policy studies from think tanks, universities and individuals, but this is done on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of a systematic programme. There are a few well-structured think tanks, but far too many small personality-based outfits that have failed to develop meaningful expertise in area studies. Apart from one or two honourable exceptions, the private sector has not deemed it worthwhile to support independent think tanks. In the universities too, international affairs and the study of foreign languages are not given adequate attention. Most of India's strategic policy community is based in New Delhi. While some commendable work is being done in other parts of the country too, researchers and students there feel quite disconnected from discussions at the Centre. There is an urgent need to set up an extensive network of centres that specialize in the study of different areas and countries.

India aspires to be a great power in the world, but lacks the required institutional structures and sophisticated systems for considered foreign policy formulation and execution. Obviously, no foreign policy initiative will be meaningful or fruitful if it is conceived and executed as a purely diplomatic exercise that is disconnected from India's domestic realities and priorities. At the same time, India's strengths can be leveraged abroad most effectively only if domestic stakeholders

have the benefit of a harmonious and coordinated diplomatic effort. The government will have to give up its current fire-fighting approach and know-all attitude. It will have to get over the problem of lack of coordination in India's foreign policy structures, and undertake a comprehensive revamping of the institutional set-up for foreign policy. Only then will India be able to play an effective role on the international stage in the coming years.