

POLICY ANALYSIS

Developing India's Foreign Policy “Software”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article outlines significant shortcomings in India's foreign policy institutions that undermine the country's capacity for ambitious and effective international action, and proposes steps that both New Delhi and Washington should take, assuming they aim to promote India's rise as a great power.

MAIN ARGUMENT

India's own foreign policy establishment hinders the country from achieving great-power status for four main reasons: (1) The Indian Foreign Service is small, hobbled by its selection process and inadequate midcareer training, and tends not to make use of outside expertise; (2) India's think-tanks lack sufficient access to the information or resources required to conduct high-quality, policy-relevant scholarship; (3) India's public universities are poorly funded, highly regulated, and fail to provide world-class education in the social sciences and other fields related to foreign policy; and (4) India's media and private firms—leaders in debating the country's foreign policy agenda—are not built to undertake sustained foreign policy research or training.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For India to achieve great-power status, a number of improvements to its foreign policy software will be required:

- expand, reform, pay, and train the Indian Foreign Service to attract and retain high-caliber officers
- encourage the growth of world-class social science research and teaching schools in India through partnerships with private Indian and U.S. investors, universities, and foundations
- invest in Indian think-tanks and U.S.-India exchange programs that build capacity for foreign policy research
- bring non-career officers into the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and other parts of the foreign policy establishment as term-limited fellows to improve outside understanding of the policy process
- support the efforts of Indian researchers to maximize public access to material related to the history of India's foreign policy by way of the 2005 Right to Information Act

Today most discussions of the future geopolitical order assume India is rapidly scaling the heights of great-power status. Recent U.S. policy toward New Delhi—including the Bush administration's civilian nuclear cooperation agreement ratified in October 2008—has been predicated on an optimistic projection of India as a powerful U.S. strategic partner. Some U.S. policymakers see in India a potential counterbalance to China's power in Asia, whereas others simply believe that the United States cannot afford to overlook the potential global influence of an Asian state with over a billion citizens and a steadily growing economy. As a result, a strong bipartisan consensus exists in Washington for seeking more extensive ties to India and for encouraging New Delhi's international ambition and capacity for action. The Obama administration has signaled its hope that India will be a U.S. partner in facing “the great common challenges of our era—strengthening the global trade and investment system, addressing transnational threats such as nuclear weapons proliferation, terrorism and pandemic disease, and meeting the urgent danger that is posed by climate change.”¹

India may not fulfill Washington's ambitious vision for the country, however, as significant bottlenecks leave its ascent less than assured. Chief among these impediments is India's physical infrastructure. Relative to China, India has underinvested in roads, ports, power plants, and many other features that have already transformed the Chinese landscape and are rapidly turning Beijing's great-power aspirations into reality.

So there is no doubt that the “hardware” of the Indian state needs urgent attention if New Delhi ever intends to play a major role in world affairs. Fortunately, prominent Indian leaders, both inside and outside government, are seized by these issues. Yet how adequate is India's “software”—the intellectual and institutional infrastructure needed to exercise power on the international scene? India must make progress on this largely overlooked front as well. Institutions charged with researching, formulating, debating, and implementing foreign policy are too often underdeveloped, in decay, or chronically short of resources. In particular, India's diplomatic service, think-tanks, and universities are not yet up to the task of managing an agenda befitting a great power. As a result, even a wealthier and more powerful India may remain politically inconsequential, unable to set forth and implement a realistic global agenda or to exercise international leadership.

¹ James Steinberg, “Opening Remarks” (conference remarks, “The U.S.-India Nuclear Agreement: Expectations and Consequences,” the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., March 23, 2009, 15)
 ~ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0323_india/20090323_india.pdf.

Because India is still far from reaching its economic potential, the country's institutional deficiencies are not yet debilitating. Over time, however, these weaknesses will shape the tone and even the substance of its foreign policy. If present trends hold, India's world-view will be parochial, reactive, and increasingly dominated by business interests rather than by strategic or political concerns. In response, Washington would need to scale back its bullish vision of the potential for U.S.-India strategic partnership.

These trends are not set in stone: India can undertake a series of reforms and investments to develop its foreign policy software, thus expanding the country's capacity to conceive and implement ambitious policies with global reach. Furthermore, if the U.S. government is committed to building a partnership with New Delhi as a true great power, Washington should also lend a hand.

This article is divided into four sections:

- ≈ pp. 76–83 examine the current state of India's foreign policy institutions: bureaucracy, think-tanks, universities, media, and private business
- ≈ pp. 83–89 highlight India's deficiencies by drawing comparisons with India's contemporary and historical peer group
- ≈ pp. 89–92 outline the defining characteristics of Indian foreign policy if private sector media and corporations continue to outpace public sector, research, and educational institutions
- ≈ pp. 92–96 propose specific reforms and investments by India and the United States to reduce the gap between India's great promise and current practice

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY INSTITUTIONS AND EXPERTISE

Although the Indian system is heavily dependent on the nation's bureaucracy for foreign policy formulation and implementation, think-tanks, universities, the media, and private business also play a role in the policymaking process. Together, these five types of institutions make up India's foreign policy software. By most accounts, this software requires a serious update if India is to hope to achieve great-power status. Maximizing the capacity and effectiveness of these five institutional sources of foreign policy prowess will provide a major boost to India's effort to secure a seat at the table of the world's top global players.

Bureaucratic Guardians: The Indian Foreign Service

Prior to India's independence in 1947, the British managed the country's foreign relations and made little effort to develop an indigenous cadre of trained diplomats. During the Indian state's formative years, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is widely viewed as having conducted his own, personalized foreign policy, depending on trusted friends and relatives for advice. The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) was originally cobbled together from the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and defense forces, and the nation's diplomatic presence was limited to a few foreign capitals.²

Today the IFS remains remarkably small. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is one of India's leanest ministries in part because the MEA has no natural domestic constituency or champion—unlike, for instance, the ministries governing railways or commerce and industry. With fewer than eight hundred professional diplomats and an annual budget of just over half a billion dollars in fiscal year (FY) 2006–07, the service is stretched across 119 resident missions and 49 consulates around the world.³ IFS officers staff the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi; as is the case in most parliamentary democracies, partisan political leaders occupy only a very few jobs at the top of the ministry. Although several thousand additional personnel manage support and logistical functions at the MEA, these individuals are not equipped to handle substantive policy initiatives, suggesting a deeply inefficient allocation of resources within the organization. As retired Indian diplomat Kishan Rana explains, the MEA's "tooth to tail ratio" is extremely low.⁴

Though IFS members tend to marvel with pride at how their diminutive corps manages to keep up with the increasing demands of India's global engagement, critics—friendly and otherwise—suggest it is well past time to expand the service. As one U.S. diplomat put it, the IFS may be right-sized for Malaysia but is certainly not for a country with India's global aspirations.⁵ Moreover, the IFS's small numbers run up and down the ranks, from junior to senior officers. Consequently, in contrast to organizations with an up-or-out promotion scheme where underperformers are weeded out over the course of a career, nearly everyone in the diplomatic service rises to the upper echelons.

² Judith M. Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 247.

³ Kishan S. Rana, *Asian Diplomacy: The Foreign Ministries of China, India, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand* (Malta and Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2007), 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ Author's interview with a U.S. government official, New Delhi, September 2007.