

WELCOMING THE MEA'S OVERHAUL - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Executive: Structure, Organization & Functioning ; Ministries and Departments of the Government

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A strategic culture arises from ideas and implementation. The ministry of external affairs (MEA) has made a laudable first step towards making such a culture possible by carrying out a major administrative restructuring. The idea is to make the ministry more responsive to the multiplicity of tasks that constitute 21st century diplomacy. Thus, some departments will be aggregated to focus on India's burgeoning aid programme and the many strands of its economic diplomacy. More senior diplomats will be freed up so that they can serve as strategic interlocutors rather than mere overseers. The nature of India's interactions with the world has also changed with technology, climate, and even adoption policies now finding their place on the international agenda.

India is today a nearly \$3 trillion-economy with interests and capacities that are growing at an exponential rate. As its strategic frontier expands, the country seeks to prevent disruptions that could disrupt its growth. Much of this is done through interactions with other governments. In some cases, it may be about reassuring external players, sometimes it is about persuasion or legitimate force. Whatever the case, controlled and calculated diplomacy is essential. India is at the forefront of defining the Indo-Pacific, holds Nordic and African summits, is pivotal to a global debate over telecom and data standards, is important to climate policy, and, if anything, struggles with the plethora of invites for consultations it receives. There have been times in the recent past when the Indian military has exhausted its budget for exercises with other countries or its foreign ministry has had to ask for favours from countries where it has no embassy. India can no longer afford such situations.

There are still many gaps in India's external relations. The MEA's staff strength is low. It continues to lag in trading negotiations. An even larger percentage of Indians remain unaware of their government's worldview. The MEA has yet to work out a means to tap the large pool of expertise that resides in the civil society. Attracting the best to the diplomatic service requires its own strategy. But the most important issue remains the creation of a sense of strategic thinking that permeates the structure of the foreign ministry. The restructuring will help.

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