India’s Foreign Policy Capacity

Kanti Bajpai and Byron Chong

Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a qualitative assessment of the policy capacity of India’s foreign policy system via an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). India is a rising power and seeks to protect its widening interests and advance its influence in international affairs. Is India’s foreign policy capacity up to delivering on its greater ambitions? The answer to that question first of all depends on an assessment of present strengths and weaknesses. Using the policy capacity conceptualization and framework developed by Xun Wu, M. Ramesh, and Michael Howlett, the paper examines the analytical, operational, and political competences of India’s Foreign Service at three levels – the individual, organizational, and systemic. The resulting nine elements of policy capacity are then assessed for the Indian foreign policy system in terms of a number of key variables. The analysis reveals that despite being staffed by skillful and highly talented individuals, the institution suffers from considerable weaknesses at the organizational level above all. These weaknesses include: the critical mass of capable IFS officers; the infrastructure for collecting and processing information; the international organization of MEA; and the extent of communication with governance partners and the public. It is vital that India pursues reforms at the organizational level if it wishes to play a bigger and more influential role internationally. Reforms here are challenging but they are more tractable than at the systemic level which requires much larger political and more difficult changes.

Policy capacity is thought to be related to public policy success and failure. In their recent work on policy capacity, Wu et al suggest that it is “the set of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions” (Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2015; Bali and Ramesh 2018). The study of policy capacity, therefore, is important for the academic study of public policy which seeks to identify the causes of policy success and failure. It is also important from the perspective of practitioners who want to improve their chances of success and reduce the incidence of
failure. This paper is an effort to assess the policy capacity of India’s foreign policy system via an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of primarily the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which are at the heart of its diplomatic effort. Using the policy capacity conceptualization and framework developed by Wu et al, it attempts a systematic audit of the IFS/MEA (Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2015, 2018). The audit reveals weaknesses in various components of policy capacity, but particularly at the organizational and systemic levels. This bears out the findings of earlier estimates of India (Markey 2009; Rana 2002a, 2014, 2002b).

India has been recognized as a rising power – on a trajectory to become a great power with ambitions of being amongst the most powerful and influential states in the international system. Commentary on India regularly refers to it as a rising power. Jim O’Neill, the former head of Goldman Sachs, famously coined the term BRICs to refer to four rising powers – Brazil, Russia, India, and China (O’Neill 2001).1 India could well become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Except for China, every major power has endorsed India as a candidate to sit alongside the current P-5, and even Beijing has shown some sympathy for India’s claims2.

India’s trajectory towards becoming a great power can be described by the size of its economy and its military capabilities. In 2017, Indian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in nominal terms was USD 2.59 trillion, making it the sixth biggest economy in the world. Some projections suggest that in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms, India could be the second largest economy after China by 2050 (PwC Global 2019). Its military consists of 1.4 million active personnel, the third largest after China and the United States (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2018). It has roughly 130 to 140 nuclear weapons which can be placed on an array of delivery systems including Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) (Kristensen and Korda 2018), and in 2009 it launched its first nuclear-powered submarine capable of carrying nuclear weapons (“PM Launches INS Arihant in Visakhapatnam,” The Times of India, July 26, 2009, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/PM-launches-INS-Arihant-in-Visakhapatnam/articleshow/4820660.cms.). In 2018, the Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index, which aggregates various dimensions of power, ranked India in fourth place after the United States, China, and Japan (Lowy Institute 2019).

India also self-consciously and publicly harbors ambitions of being a great power. Less than a year after his inauguration in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described his goal for India as its taking a “leading role” in global affairs (Parashar 2015). Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar spoke of India’s aspirations to be a “leading power” (Tellis 2016). And Minister of State for External Affairs V K Singh saw India on track to becoming “a leading world power” (“India on Right Track to be a World Power: Gen VK Singh,” Business Standard, January 10, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/india-on-right-track-to-be-a-world-power-gen-vk-singh-119011000473_1.html.). In sum, India will be an increasingly consequential player in international affairs, and understanding its foreign policy capacity is important for analysts and practitioners, Indian and non-Indian.

Does India have the foreign policy capacity commensurate with its rising power ambitions? To answer that question will require detailed exposition of its ambitions
and the ways and means of attaining them, in short, a grand strategy analysis. This is beyond the scope of our paper. Nevertheless, an assessment of India’s foreign policy capacity is pertinent to the question. Nor does the paper relate strengths and weaknesses in policy capacity to success and failure in actual foreign policy initiatives and episodes. Our effort here is strictly an analysis of India’s foreign policy capacity within a structured framework. We note, though, the judgment of former Indian Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, based on his reconstruction of five key foreign policy choices since the early 1990s, that “India has serious capacity issues in the implementation of foreign policy and lacks the institutional depth to see policy through” (Menon 2016, p 192). Menon argues that India showed “boldness in policy conception, caution in implementation”. He traces implementation problems to centralization of decision-making, lack of “capability” in the foreign ministry, weak “institutionalization of foreign policy implementation”, and serious “capacity issues". Menon’s suggestion here seems to be that relative strengths in some dimensions of foreign policy capacity produce boldness in conceptualization which is offset by weaknesses in other dimensions which produce caution in implementation (Menon 2016, p 191–192).

Based on our audit of Indian foreign policy capacity, we argue that the IFS and MEA have strengths in terms of the individual level competences of its officers but also a range of weaknesses particularly at the organizational and systemic levels, the most tractable and remediable weaknesses being at the organizational level. The paper is organized in the following sections. First, it reviews existing works on the Indian foreign policy system and recaps the Wu et al. conceptualization and framework of policy capacity as a way of conducting the present audit. It then proceeds to assess Indian foreign policy skills and competences at the level of individual officers. This is followed by a similar assessment at the organizational level of MEA. The fourth section analyses policy capacity at the systemic level which includes actors beyond the IFS and MEA. The paper concludes with thoughts on possible reforms of the Indian foreign policy system designed to enhance policy capacity and by returning to Menon’s suggestion on the disjuncture between boldness in conceptualization and caution in implementation. We suggest, tentatively, that the relative strengths in individual level competence may account for boldness of conceptualization while the weaknesses at the organizational and systemic levels may account for caution in implementation.

**A framework for assessing policy capacity**

Using the framework for assessing policy capacity developed by Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2015 (p 165–171), we attempt an audit of India’s foreign policy system. A policy making approach to foreign policy has made important contributions. The classic works of Graham Allison, Irving Janis, Richard Snyder et al., and John Steinbruner sought to open up the black box of foreign policy making (Allison 1971; Janis 1982; Snyder et al. 1962; Steinbruner 1974). Alexander George and Richard Smoke’s massive volume on cases of deterrence in American foreign policy used the method of structured focused comparison and process tracing to give us granular insights into deterrence success and failure (George and Smoke 1974). These works provided heuristics...
for and cases of foreign policy decision making and at least by implication were suggestive of foreign policy capacity (or incapacity). However, they do not systemically address the issue of how to assess and measure foreign policy capacity.

Studies of Indian foreign policy that are systematic and insightful on the issue of policy capacity are few as well and suffer from the problem of not directly addressing the criteria by which we could determine capacity. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, a former IFS officer turned academic, applying a policy making framework to India’s foreign policy in the early 1970s, studied the determinants, institutions, processes, and personalities of the system (Bandyopadhyaya 1970). Perhaps the most famous study of Indian foreign policy making that dealt with capacity is Shashi Tharoor’s Reasons of State: Political Development and India’s Foreign Policy under Indira Gandhi, 1966-1977. Tharoor argued in effect that Indian foreign policymaking capacity was low: the institutions of foreign policy making including MEA, the press, and interest groups as well as public opinion and political leadership made for an under-developed system (Tharoor 1982). Both studies in effect deal with policy capacity but fail to articulate the concept explicitly. Both are also assessments of a much earlier period and are largely outdated.

Indian foreign policy capacity has been the object of attention since at least former American diplomat and academic Daniel Markey’s well-known 2009 paper, “Developing India’s Foreign Policy ‘Software’” which went beyond an assessment of the IFS and MEA to take a more systemic view of Indian capacities including in the private sector and civil society. Markey argued that the IFS was too small due to its highly selective recruitment policy; mid-career training was “inadequate”; outside expertise was not usually consulted, and India’s think tanks and universities lacked information, access to government, or funding; and the media and private business were not positioned to “undertake sustained foreign policy research or training” (Markey 2009, p 74). “This article,” he writes of his intervention, “outlines significant shortcomings in India’s foreign policy institutions that undermine the country’s capacity for ambitious and effective international action ….” (Markey 2009, p 74).

### Table 1. Policy capacity.

| Capabilities       | Analytical                                                                 | Operational                                                                  | Political                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual         | • Officials’ analytical capacity – knowledge, techniques                    | • Managerial and leadership skills of officials                               | • Political knowledge, experience including identifying interests, ideas and ideologies of others and political tradeoffs required |
| Organizational     | • Critical mass of capable officials                                       | • Internal organization of public agencies – cohesion                        | • Communications with governance partners and public                       |
| Systemic           | • General technical knowledge and educational capacities/facilities in society | • Relationship of organization to political institutions                      | • Trust/ legitimacy in political, social, economic, security processes and institutions |

Adapted from Wu et al (2015).
Indian analysts too bemoan the weakness in foreign policymaking. Five years after Markey, in 2014, former Indian diplomat Kishan S. Rana, who has written extensively on the IFS/MEA, concluded that the “glass half-full” view of the service should be replaced by a “glass gets fuller” view, indicating that foreign policy capacity had increased but still has significant weaknesses. Among its weaknesses were: insufficient executive level officers and overworked personnel; understaffed headquarters; lack of specialized knowledge; a highly pyramidal and hierarchical staffing structure; absence of coordination with other public and private agencies; old-fashioned administration and human resource management; and traditional training methods. Among its strengths were: highly selective recruitment; greater social diversity amongst officers; high morale; considerable room for policy initiative at least at the senior level (in the absence of top-down direction); and improvements in training (Rana 2014).

Our paper offers an updated assessment of India’s foreign policy capacity at a time when India continues to rise as an economic and diplomatic power. We do this by using Wu et al.’s framework (summarised in Table 1) which conceptualizes capacity as a “system” of nested competencies and capabilities.

We note several features of the Wu et al.’s conceptualization. First, overall policy capacity is greater than the sum of its parts. The nine components are related to each other in potentially complex ways: capacities at any one level can increase or reduce capacities at the other two levels and, therefore, it is the combination of capacities at various levels that defines total capacity (Howlett and Ramesh 2015). Second, policy capacity is relevant to each stage of the policy making process: agenda setting, formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation. Third, policy capacity is best thought of in relation to a policy sector. While it may be useful to develop a measure of a country’s overall policy capacity, it is probably more relevant to speak of policy capacity in a given issue area and keeping in mind specific policy objectives: for example, foreign policy capacity, social policy capacity, and so on. Finally, policy capacity is more than just government or state capacity. While government or state capacity must be at the heart of policy capacity, the capacities of non-governmental stakeholders are important and should be included in any audit.

Our study does not attempt the complex analysis required to trace through the links between the various levels to show how capacity or incapacity at one level affects the other levels. This would require a much larger research effort and is beyond the scope of our current endeavor. Nor do we attempt to show how capacities at various levels affect each stage of the policy process. Instead, we estimate capacities in each of the nine boxes using the variables listed there and essay a preliminary conclusion of Indian foreign policy capacity. In doing so, while we largely focus on foreign policy capacity in the government (the IFS and MEA), we do pay attention to the larger capacities available outside government and the relationship of the IFS/MEA to non-governmental stakeholders.

To anticipate our conclusion, we argue that the analytical, operational, and political competences at the individual level are relatively high, but they are weak at the organizational and are quite mixed at the systemic level. Wu et al. suggest that the “systemic level-political capacity” component is perhaps the most important in policy capacity. They note that “capabilities such as the level of support and trust a public agency
enjoys from its political masters and from the society at large as well as the nature of the economic and security systems within which policy-makers operate, are key components of policy capacity." (Wu, Howlett, and Ramesh 2015). If so, India’s foreign policy capacity is likely to remain problematic. Our analysis will suggest that the effort at reform and improvement should be targeted at the organizational level where change will be easier to make because the scope of reforms is far more limited and not a society-wide challenge.

On a methodological note, foreign policy decision makers and foreign policy capacity here are considered largely with reference to the IFS/MEA and specifically its executive level officers. The foreign policy system includes a larger pool of decision makers and institutions: the Prime Minister and his office (the PMO); the Cabinet and its Committee on Security in particular; the Ministry of Defense; the Ministry of Home Affairs; various economic ministries; the foreign affairs committee of Parliament; and so on (Madan 2015)7. However, this larger assemblage is beyond the purview of the paper which is a first-cut at trying to understand foreign policy capacity in India: the IFS and MEA are at the center of the foreign policy system and must, therefore, be a starting point for an audit. We note that our paper draws on the work of Markey and Rana as also newspaper and other public sources. Its contribution is twofold: to show Indian foreign policy making continues to be beset by most of the deficiencies noted by Markey, Rana, and others; and in bearing out their conclusions, we show that the Wu et al.’s framework is a useful heuristic for assessments of policy capacity.

Assessing Indian foreign policy capacity at the individual level

We begin our analysis by looking at the executive officers who manage India’s day-to-day external affairs – the IFS officers. As the face of India’s overseas diplomacy, these individuals are tasked with promoting their country’s nation interests abroad. We assess their capabilities using three key variables: the analytical capacity of officials (i.e. their knowledge and techniques); the managerial and leadership skills of officials; and the political knowledge and experience of decision makers including their understanding of the interests, ideas, and ideologies of other political actors.

Analytical capacity of officers

There has been no systematic assessment of the analytical capacity of foreign policy decision makers, and especially of IFS officers who are the backbone of the system. Nor is it clear how analytical capacity would be established. Officer performance is assessed annually by means of the “Confidential Report” (CR), and this may contain evaluations of analytical capacity, but the CR data was not available to us. In any case, the assessments are beset by problems including “over-generous reporting”, inconsistency of evaluation between senior officers, and reluctance to make “negative observations” (Rana 2002b, p 298–299).

While impressionistic and subjective, there is evidence that the skills of IFS officers are of a high level, comparable to counterparts in the diplomatic services of bigger powers and more advanced economies. This is attested to by foreign and Indian
diplomats. Their judgment is that IFS officers work extremely long hours and are under enormous pressure in dealing with myriad responsibilities but are professionally impressively competent. For example, the former Canadian High Commissioner in India and author of a well-regarded volume on Indian foreign policy notes “The quality of IFS personnel is among the highest in the world … The outside view of Indian diplomats in vogue thirty years ago as hard working, well-informed, and sometimes brilliant … [This] has given way to a more cosmopolitan, entertaining, self-deprecating if still highly intelligent and hardworking cadre …” (Malone 2011, p7–8). Veteran American diplomats Teresita and Howard Shaffer, who dealt with Indian diplomats over three decades, write that foreigners dealing with the Indians attest to “the formidable talent IFS officers bring to the negotiating table. They are highly regarded for their tireless and ingenious efforts to develop their briefs, their mastery of relevant precedents, their sophisticated knowledge of the English language, and their success in understanding their opponents’ strengths and weaknesses” (Schaffer and Schaffer 2016, p 89). In his measured and balanced work on the IFS and MEA, Kishan Rana, who has served in the Indian Foreign Service and has studied it extensively, notes “When it is at its best, the Indian diplomatic style is innovative, assiduous, and brilliant in persuasive ability … Indian diplomats … are held in respect by their foreign peers, and are reputed for being able get things done” (Rana 2002b, p 36). Shashi Tharoor, former Minister of State for External Affairs and also former Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information at the United Nations, writes: “The Indian diplomatic corps has long enjoyed a justified reputation as among the world’s best in individual talent and ability. It includes men and women of exceptional intellectual and personal distinction who have acquired formidable reputations in a variety of capitals” (Tharoor 2012b, p 321).

Why are individual level skills and competences relatively high? First, recruits to the IFS have come through a highly competitive and stringent process of examinations and an interview. On average they have probably written the entrance examination 2 or even 3 times before being selected. In 2016, there were 1.13 million applicants for the combined civil services examination, of which over 450,000 actually sat for the tests (Shrivastava 2017). Just over 1000 were offered the top three services – the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), the Indian Police Service (IPS), and the IFS. The IFS today recruits between 30 and 35 officers per year, out of the nearly half a million that sat for the examination and more than one thousand that were offered top-level jobs (Bagchi 2016; Mohan 2013). Clearly, to be recruited into the Foreign Service requires a certain degree of doggedness and intellectual attainment.

As against this, there is the view that the IFS no longer attracts the top-ranked candidates in the civil service examination and, like the domestic services, has had to accept lower-caste candidates who qualify on the basis of affirmative action quotas (50 percent of recruits must be from quotas) which has led to a lowering of standards. The quality of recruits is, therefore, thought to have declined. Whereas the IFS drew from those placed highest in the examination until the early 1970s, it has been forced to go increasingly deep in the list to complete its quota of recruits: in 1972, 20 of the top 26 in the examination chose the Foreign Service; in 1988, to get 10 IFS officers, it was necessary to go down to the 480th position (Datta-Ray 2015, p 56). In 2017, only
5 candidates opted for the IFS out of the top 100, and the final place in its quota was bottom of the recruitment list (“Service Allocation UPSC CSE 2017 – Who got IAS, IPS, IFS…?” ClearIAS, https://www.clearias.com/service-allocation-upsc-cse-2017-who-got-ias-ips-ifs/). With the planned expansion of the Foreign Service, the concern is that it will have to go even further down the ranks to fulfill its quota. As to why the IFS no longer attracts the topmost candidates, this is attributed to a variety of factors: a lack of opportunities for corruption and power (which are to be found in the domestic civil services); the irrelevance of diplomacy to India’s real concerns (e.g. development); the attractiveness of a career in the private sector (for financial and lifestyle reasons); and, unlike in the past, the relative ease with which private citizens can live and travel abroad and no longer need to be diplomats to see the world.

Yet, the reference to quality of recruits based on examination ranks presents a misleading picture. The Foreign Service recruits from the top 500 out of nearly half a million candidates who sit for the civil service examination. The final ranking of candidates depends heavily on the results of the written examinations, and the gap between the topmost and lower rankings may only be a matter of a few marks. It is unclear how this gap in examination marks implies a lack of talent for diplomatic life. Training, socialization, mentoring, and a range of other abilities will bear on long-term performance in the Foreign Service.

Second, the fifteen-month training program is fairly thorough on the basics of administration and India’s political structures and processes as well as the development of analytical skills. Probationers – new entrants to the service – spend four months with officers from the domestic civil services doing the “Foundation Course” that deals largely with general administration, Indian politics, society, and economy, and larger global trends. This is followed by attachments with the armed forces and district administration. From here, the probationers proceed to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) for more specialized training and a visit to a neighboring South Asian country. They also do stints in various MEA divisions and learn a foreign language (Foreign Service Institute 2019). Rana, on the basis of a survey of IFS officers concludes that “25% (of officers) considered that training of officials needs to be improved, not only for new entrants but also at mid-career and senior levels” (Rana 2002b). This latter judgment suggests that for most officers – 75 percent – the training they receive is a positive experience.

Third, over the years, as with the domestic services, IFS officers must take various “refresher” courses. These may be online since diplomats can serve abroad for several years continuously. Over the past decade, the government has encouraged civil servants to upgrade their skills by taking academic leave, spending time at an Indian think tank such as the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), training for a year at the National Defense College, or even enlisting in courses abroad (Standing Committee on External Affairs 2016, p 25–26, 55).

Fourth, until the late 1970s, the IFS was regarded as the most elite service, with the highest-ranked candidates in the general examination opting for it (Tharoor 2012a). Corporate élan and a sense of intellectual superiority has remained since then (though clearly morale is not as high as it was in the past). IFS officers operate in a bureaucratic culture that holds to a proud tradition of high-quality work (Tharoor 2012a). While the size of the IFS has been compared unfavorably with other Foreign Services, it is the
compactness of the service that has played a part in fostering and sustaining a culture of high-quality reporting and analysis. IFS officers concede that the service should be larger, but they also affirm that the smallness of the service has placed a premium on quality delivery (Ramachandran 2013).

Fifth, compared to the domestic services, the IFS is the least politicized part of Indian administration and is left alone to do its job with much less interference from political masters (Markey 2009, p 77). In such an environment, analytical independence and competence are valued and are allowed freer rein.

**Managerial and leadership skills of the officers**

Officers must bring not only analytical competence to their job – interpreting international affairs and inferring what the implications may be for India of various trends and developments – but must also be skilled in operating within an organization. They must therefore possess managerial and leadership competence.

Each new batch of IFS officers begin their training with a three-month foundation course at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy for Administration (LBSNAA). While the program focuses on giving trainees a basic understanding of India’s political, economic, and social issues, it does not just employ conventional classroom-style lectures; instead, diverse teaching approaches such as simulation exercises, panel discussions, and group work are used (Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration 2016). Besides developing teamwork and leadership, these teaching methods give trainees the chance to interact and work alongside recruits of different administrative services and of different socio-economic backgrounds. After LBSNAA, IFS officers do another 5½-month training period at the FSI. Here, the modules cover relevant areas such as foreign policy and economics, as well as soft skills like management, leadership, teamwork, and public speaking (Standing Committee on External Affairs 2016, p 28–29). Mid-career diplomats have to periodically return to FSI for re-training in these areas (Foreign Service Institute 2019).

The softer, managerial and leadership skills are essential for IFS officers and they are often quickly acquired in the rather challenging work environment at home in headquarters but perhaps even more so in the embassies abroad. Given chronic understaffing, many overseas missions are led by only an ambassador and one other diplomatic-rank officer (Marlow 2018). In these straitened circumstances, lower-rank officers frequently take on multiple responsibilities and functions (Miller 2013, p 15). In addition, it has been suggested that many overseas missions receive little to no direction from New Delhi, allowing Indian diplomats significant latitude in deciding policy (Miller 2013, p 15). This environment, where decisions are decentralized and often left to the field officers, individuals are encouraged to step up at an early stage in their careers, thus honing leadership and managerial competences.

There are negative consequences to this decentralized and discretionary system. Having to juggle multiple responsibilities means that the stretched diplomatic corps struggles to keep pace with day-to-day affairs (Staniland and Narang 2015, p 210). Delegating responsibilities downwards also means that functions are sometimes performed by under-qualified individuals. In one instance, a ministerial stenographer was
appointed as India’s ambassador to North Korea (Marlow 2018). Moreover, the culture of “promotion by seniority” means that even those lacking in leadership and managerial skills may eventually rise to positions of authority (Markey 2009, p 77).

**Individual political knowledge/experience of dealing with political actors**

The IFS is thought to live in its own “bubble” by the other services, and IFS officers themselves admit to not knowing the administrative byways of India as intimately or shrewdly as the officers of the various domestic services (Markey 2009, p 78–79). However, they do bring solid political knowledge and experience to their work including an understanding of the interests, ideas, and ideologies of political actors (Schaffer and Schaffer 2016, p 89). Their stints in New Delhi or in the embassies brings them into frequent contact with Members of Parliament (MPs) state-level Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs), state ministers including chief ministers, and central ministers. This includes spending a good deal of time, particularly when they are abroad in key embassies, in receiving and looking after visiting politicians (and their families). More importantly, various central ministries and state governments turn to the embassies for advice and interventions abroad on a range of issues. In the process, IFS officers are exposed to the political cross-winds and shapers of policy making and must quickly learn how to navigate the political seas of decision making. Thus, even if they are not as politically knowledgeable as their domestic service counterparts, they are by no means naïve.

**Assessment of Indian foreign policy capacity at the organizational level**

We have argued that IFS officers individually are analytically talented, have good managerial skills, and are politically knowledgeable. How does the IFS do on organizational
skills and competences? Among the organizational variables that affect policy capacity Wu et al. suggest are the critical mass of capable officials and the infrastructure for collecting and processing information; the internal organization of public agencies and particularly their internal cohesion; the relationship of a policy making organization to political institutions; and learning and communications with governance partners and the public. Our assessment suggests that contrary to individual level competencies and skills, Indian foreign policymaking is marked by serious organizational deficiencies.

**Critical mass of capable officials and the information infrastructure**

As Markey notes, the IFS is extremely small compared to other major Foreign Services (Markey 2009, p 83–84). Even the MEA accepts that the current strength of the service is unable to meet the needs of India’s external commitments. Figure 1 shows the gradual increase of the sanctioned strength of IFS (A) officers from 708 in 2007 to 941 in 2017 – an expansion by nearly a-third over a decade. Yet, despite the increase in available posts, actual numbers remained low. In 2016, there were only 770 IFS (A) executive level officers, against a sanctioned strength of 912 (Bagchi 2016b). India’s total diplomatic corps (consisting of anyone who is permitted to hold a diplomatic passport, including support staff and members of other services seconded to the Ministry), is around 2700 as against 1250 for South Korea, 800–850 for Singapore, 1300 for New Zealand, 900 for Italy, 2000 for Brazil, 4500 for China, and 5700 for Japan (Bagchi 2016b).

India maintains a cadre strength of around 330 executive level officers in New Delhi and stations another 600 officers spread across 184 embassies, consulates, and missions abroad (Ministry of External Affairs 2018, p 2, 34, 318). This means that the average number of IFS officers in a mission is 3 to 4. Former diplomat Rana suggests that the “headquarters to mission” ratio should ideally be 1 is to 1.5 or 2, judging by ratios of other leading services. In India’s case it is 1.8. While not ideal, this is a significant improvement from the 1:4 ratio during the late 1990s, or the 1:2.7 ratio in 2014 (Rana 2014, p 25). At headquarters, the ministry is divided into roughly 68 divisions which are organized by regions and sub-regions in the world, functional areas, and logistics (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). This makes for 4 to 5 officers per division. For a country that is active in regional and multilateral diplomacy and aspires to be a great power, these are very low figures. Put differently, for a country of 1.3 billion people, soon to be the most populous country in the world, the figures appear absurd. The US, with one quarter of India’s current population, is reputed to have a total diplomatic corps eight times the size of India, and China which is slightly bigger in population terms fields roughly twice the number as India (Bagchi 2016b).

MEA also lacks infrastructure for collecting and, more importantly, processing information. It needs its own think tank. In the 1960s, it briefly had an active Policy Planning Review Division (later renamed), but without academia or think tank expertise and with the proliferation of “internal squabbles, personality clashes, and ministerial rivalries”, the unit went quickly into eclipse. It remains a career graveyard (Mattoo and Medcalf 2015, p 273). Its rejuvenation will require changes in structure including the
recruitment of outsiders but will be boosted if the IFS is enlarged, as more officers would be available for long-term strategic thinking and scenario planning.

In summary, the smallness of the IFS means that the infrastructure for gathering and processing information and ideas is quite weak relative to other major powers and to India’s own commitments and ambitions.

**Internal organizational coherence**

The internal organization of MEA consists, as noted, of 68 substantive divisions. The challenge for the ministry is its highly funneled and pyramidal structure. Rana notes that at the top the ministry has four Secretaries and one Foreign Secretary. The Foreign Secretary is the “principal of the foreign policy apparatus”, head of the IFS, direct supervisor of relations with twelve or so key partner countries, and a vital adviser to the Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister when they travel abroad (Rana 2014, p 26). Rana notes that the four secretaries are the second tier in the ministry’s hierarchy and carry a much lighter load than the Foreign Secretary. Despite calls for reforms, the structure at the top has remained the same, leading to delays in decision making and difficulties of coordinating with other ministries and agencies as well as with foreign partners (Rana 2014, p 26)19.

A bonus of the system is that MEA is quite cohesive under a very small cockpit. Given the small size of the IFS, everyone in a cohort will likely make it to an ambassadorial position which is unlike other major Foreign Services (Markey 2009, p 77). This also has the effect of maintaining organizational cohesion. The biggest challenges to IFS cohesion probably arise out of controversial promotions, especially at the highest levels of the service. On two occasions, the Foreign Secretary was appointed on merit rather than seniority. This practice seems to have now been stopped (Rana 2014, p 26).

**Relationship to political institutions**

MEA, as suggested earlier, is not involved in the daily business of Indian administration and therefore has a certain “distance” from politics and politicization. The flip side of this positive distancing, though, is that it is not greatly influential in domestic administration and does not have strong links to India’s political institutions except the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

The External Affairs Minister is a key member of the Cabinet and its inner circle in the Cabinet Committee on Security as also the National Security Council (NSC). It has personnel seconded to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and the National Security Council (NSC) including most importantly the Foreign Secretary who is a member of the Strategic Policy Group (SPG) within the Council (Madan 2015, p 234). A senior IFS officer has been Deputy National Security Advisor or National Security Advisor since the inception of the NSC. MEA also works with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, which is one of nearly 50 such committees. In addition, it increasingly deals with state governments and has a dedicated section, the States’ Division, for coordinating with state capitals (Haidar 2014). Paradiplomacy – the involvement in and conduct of foreign policy by sub-state actors – is on the rise even
in highly-centralized federal India, as a function of the country’s economic liberalization and its coalition politics, and it has become imperative for the Ministry to engage state administrations more systematically\textsuperscript{20}.

By and large, the relationship of MEA to political institutions is a correct one: it is accountable and is firmly under political control; and it is, in turn, nonpartisan and autonomous from political parties. MEA obeys its political masters but is not unusually partisan\textsuperscript{21}. It, therefore, maintains internal cohesion as well as continuity in its bureaucratic culture and a high degree of continuity in its thinking. It is worth noting that since a great deal of its functioning is outside India and far from the daily scrutiny of the media, MPs, and ministers, there is room for enterprising officers in MEA to take the initiative, a point we noted earlier\textsuperscript{22}.

**Communicating with other agencies and the public**

At the organizational level, how well does MEA communicate with governance partners and the public? MEA is largely divorced from domestic governance. It does, however, have to work with a range of departments, ministries, state governments, public sector agencies, and the like. We have little information on this aspect of its functioning, but presumably it is the normal process. Worth noting though is that by all accounts the IFS still attracts a fair amount of resentment from the other services and some lack of respect.

While it is true that the attractions of the service have declined over the past 30 years, and the IAS and IPS and even the Indian Revenue Service (IRS) are considered better career tracks, the attitudes of the past have not been altogether laid to rest. IFS officers continue to bear a sense of superiority over the domestic services, despite the evident decline in prestige of the service\textsuperscript{23}. At the same time, many in the other services regard the IFS officers as living luxurious lives abroad, with perks and lifestyles not available to those serving at home. Over the years, jealousy has given way to a degree of contempt. IFS officers are seen as generalists who do not know very much about Indian administration or technical matters, as superficial minded and divorced from the “realities” of Indian life, and as operating at the margins of policy decisions. Those from the domestic services often feel that they are simply better qualified and trained and could do a better job at protecting and advancing Indian interests abroad. All this adds up to difficulties in communicating and working with fellow civil servants at home who either resent MEA or look down on it\textsuperscript{24}.

MEA’s communication with the public has historically been quite restricted. It is only in the last twenty years or so that the ministry has emulated counterparts abroad in giving greater salience to its spokesperson. Being the foreign ministry’s spokesperson used to be a career graveyard, but with the explosion in media – first television and then social media – the office of spokesperson has grown in importance. The appointment is now a coveted one and regarded as a career enhancer. Former spokespersons have gone on to the more senior ambassadorships and high-level positions at headquarters. They are frequently seen on television and on twitter. Communication with the media has increased and from the media onwards to the public. In this respect, MEA is probably ahead of its domestic counterparts who are rarely seen on television.
or on social media. Aware of its isolation from the public and of the lack of foreign affairs awareness in society, since 2010, the Ministry has recruited retired ambassadors to give 245 public lectures at Indian universities and policy institutes, largely in second-tier cities.

Less positively, the general air of secrecy, lack of transparency, and suspicion of the public is pervasive. Old habits die hard, and MEA is no exception to the traditional reluctance of the Indian government to communicate with ordinary citizens. Its preferred mode is to brief or to leak to sections of the media that it trusts as a way of presenting its views. It is rare for senior officers to go out and speak semi-publicly at think tanks or other professional bodies in the private sector—such as say business associations—or even at universities. The most public form of outreach is either passive, i.e. via MEA’s website, or more active, via official tweeting and Facebook posts. We have no measure of the effectiveness of these communications. It should be noted that MEA communicates largely in English, and, therefore, a larger audience in India cannot access what it is saying. Outside India, the ministry’s abilities are even more modest. The big embassies have a public diplomacy function of some size, but even then, it is largely the ambassador that speaks at local institutions. Embassies rarely organize big public events, even to showcase India. This may be due to staffing shortages and budgetary constraints as well as a judgment that the outreach is not particularly cost effective.

All in all, MEA’s public outreach and the degree of engagement of Indian society with foreign policy is rather limited. This may well limit the ministry’s policy capacity, although it is likely that IFS officers are glad of the lack of public attention and involvement in the workings of their ministry and in foreign policy, fearing popular and populist interventions.

Assessment of Indian foreign policy capacity at the systemic level

We have shown that the IFS/MEA has strengths at the individual competences level but has significant weaknesses at the organizational level. Foreign policy capacity is also problematic at the systemic level. Here factors such as the general state of knowledge and educational capacities/facilities in society at large on foreign policy issues, coordinative capabilities between MEA and the private and people sector, and public trust in political, social, economic, and diplomatic processes and institutions are relevant. In this section, we move away from the IFS and MEA to assess the larger foreign policy capacity of India. Clearly, the ability to make foreign policy effectively must depend on the general awareness and knowledge of the country’s external positioning and challenges, on the capacity of decision-makers to work with other actors relevant to the field such as businesses and NGOs, and on the public’s trust in the judgment and “smarts” of its diplomats.

We suggest that on systemic competences in foreign policy capacity, the picture is quite mixed. The general awareness and knowledge of international affairs in the wider public is quite low. The education sector, including policy institutes, is also quite weak in producing high-quality international studies teaching and research. In addition, MEA’s partnering of business and NGOs is quite “thin”. Finally, in contrast to the
rather gloomy picture on public awareness of foreign policy and international relations and partnerships, public trust of the government appears to be relatively high compared to other societies (though evidence in this regard is scarce and open to question): foreign policy making being remote from the lives of most ordinary citizens, it is probably better shielded from feelings of mistrust than virtually any other policy sector.

Knowledge of foreign policy and international relations in society at large

As Markey and others have suggested, knowledge of and specialization in foreign policy and International Relations in India is quite limited (Markey 2009, p 79–81). The media is perhaps the greatest disseminator of information and ideas. However, as the media has expanded, the quality of what it imparts has apparently deteriorated. It is not just fake news that afflicts news stories but also poor-quality analysis and lack of independence in reporting and interpretation. The causes of the decline in quality reporting and analysis are complex, but key reasons include the carrying over of culture wars into the media, the growing fear of media owners that they may run afoul of governments, and journalists’ desire to curry favor with political parties in power (Joshi 2015, p 262). In addition, the media has failed to develop expertise in foreign policy and International Relations. Until the 1980s, the Indian press had widely-respected columnists, editors, and correspondents including in international affairs. As the industry changed and became more commercial minded, it has turned to increasingly superficial analysis and reporting of the news including foreign policy (Joshi 2015, p 268–269).

At the same time, Indian universities are not rich in International Relations (IR) programs. The largest program is at the School of International Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru Universities (JNU). There are a handful of other dedicated IR programs which can boast of any depth. A broad view is that the quality of international studies is weak (Alagappa 2009, p 10–11; Markey 2009, p79–81). Nor is there evidence that the Indian government is interested in encouraging IR at Indian universities, preferring to fund the natural and applied sciences.

Nor is the situation much better at Indian think tanks (Markey 2009, p 79–81). Only four think tanks of any size are dedicated to IR or make IR central – the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), funded by the Ministry of Defense; the Indian Council of World Affairs, funded by MEA; the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), a private organization; and the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), also a private organization (Bagchi 2016a; Gogna 2018). In addition, the armed forces support four think tanks – the Center for Land and Warfare Studies (CLAWS), the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), the Center for Air Power Studies (CAPS), and the Center for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). Of some importance too is the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), substantially supported by MEA, which brings China expertise to the policy making table.

Nonetheless, it remains true that India’s think tanks in this (and other areas of public policy) are not greatly respected or well known outside the small circle of journalists, civil servants, former diplomats and retired military officers, academics, and foreign diplomats who make up the foreign affairs community in Delhi. Not
surprisingly, their ability to inform government policy making is limited and their public education function in India is even more limited (Mattoo and Medcalf 2015, p 276–279).

Coordination with other actors and sectors

A second systemic limit on foreign policy capacity is the rather poor coordination between MEA and other parts sections of the government on one hand, and the private and people sector, on the other hand. We have already noted the low level of inter-agency coordination. Matters are worse with the private sector and civil society.

MEA and the embassies do collaborate with Indian business associations, such as the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), and with individual companies who have interests and operations abroad (Kumar 2015, p 253). CII is particularly active abroad, with eleven offices outside India, and cooperates with MEA and other Indian departments. MEA also works with private sector organizations that have a foreign policy function such as the Ananta Aspen Center which is backed by the Avantha Group (Jha 2015). However, the quality of interaction is not high. While industry usually aligns itself closely with the government’s foreign policy stances, the ministry remains rather suspicious of any role for it in foreign policy. MEA’s interactions with NGOs have been even less fructuous. While Indian business tends to align with official stances, NGOs are regarded with suspicion: they often are funded from abroad, they are seen as purveyors of “feedback they provide to foreign NGOs,” and they are subject to “oversight, enforced by the Ministry of Home Affairs, to ensure that foreign funds do not intrude into sensitive areas or interfere in domestic politics.” (Rana 2002b, p 362) In MEA’s view, NGOs are often anti-state and insistent on levels of transparency and openness which the ministry disdains30. It therefore only reaches out to NGOs on issues such as the environment and perhaps also development (particularly now that the Ministry’s overseas development assistance has grown in importance)31. Just how meager the relationship is between MEA and NGOs is perhaps indicated by the fact that in the 750-page long Oxford Handbook on Indian Foreign Policy, not a single chapter is devoted to the subject of civil society and the conduct of external relations. The editors evidently did not consider the topic significant enough to include32.

In short, MEA has a rather imperial and exclusivist view of foreign policy and does not trust entities outside the government, indeed, outside the IFS. At the same time, the private and people sectors find MEA rather heavy-footed and old-fashioned as well as ill-informed in their areas of operation (Kumar 2015, p 249).

Trust between the government and the public

Finally, trust levels between the Indian government and the public are seemingly high which is positive for MEA. We say “seemingly” as the hard evidence on public trust of government is scant and mixed.
According to the Global Trust Index released every year at Davos, India ranks amongst the highest countries: the country is placed in the top five out of 27 countries surveyed in recent years (Wener-Fligner 2015; “India Among Top Three Countries Where Trust in Government Remains High,” The Times of India, January 29, 2018, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-among-top-three-countries-where-trust-in-government-remains-high/articleshow/62687185.cms.). However, these figures can be misleading. First, only 27 countries are included in the assessment. Secondly, only 1150 persons per country are surveyed. Thirdly, since this is done online, it is likely biased towards those who are wealthy and educated enough to be approached. Fourth, given that the survey is advertised as an international comparison, it is quite possible that those polled are voting with their nationalist hearts rather than their social heads. Interestingly, the index shows the highest degree of trust is in relatively authoritarian states where nationalism is often high (such as in China) and where fear that the survey process may not be altogether free of government surveillance might affect the way respondents assess their governments. Anecdotally, the impression is that Indians are quite skeptical of their governments and their politicians and administrators. A widespread view, for instance, is that politicians and administrators are corrupt and self-serving (“India Ranks 81st in Global Corruption Perception Index,” The Economic Times, February 22, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-ranks-81st-in-global-corruption-perception-index/articleshow/63025217.cms.).

However, this scepticism may not touch the IFS and MEA much, since ordinary citizens do not encounter the foreign office except when they apply for passports. Passport issuance has improved over the past decade and so complaints about corruption (or inefficiency) should have declined33. In fact, the evidence is mixed, but in any case the number of corruption complaints against MEA seem low given India’s size and given the extent of corruption in the country34. We might conclude that in respect of foreign policy, Indians repose a fair degree of trust in their officials and leaders due to the remoteness of the issue area from their daily lives and the paucity of personal encounters with the foreign policy bureaucracy. Overall, the evidence on public trust in India probably varies. It depends on who is asking the question, who is observing trust levels, who is being asked, and on what issue areas they are being asked to make a judgment.

Conclusion

The Wu et al. framework provided a way of systematically assessing Indian foreign policy capacity. Our analysis suggests that in respect of the three levels of capacity, the individual level is relatively strong, judging at least by the abilities and morale of IFS executive level officers. The organizational and systemic levels are weaker, with significant weaknesses and lacunae. Systemic level change will be slow and challenging given the range of actors and processes that require change – from creating greater foreign policy awareness in India and reform of international studies teaching and research to increasing the level of trust in government – trust building being a complex process that resides at the heart of the political system and is deeply connected to nature of political culture.
The organizational level features various weaknesses and lacunae. These are more tractable and is the level at which reforms should begin. A key organizational reform is to reduce the extremely hierarchical nature of the top leadership at headquarters. Decreasing the centralization of decision-making in the Foreign Secretary and increasing the role of the Secretaries below the Foreign Secretary would be a beginning. Enlarging the power of the moribund policy planning unit is another way of reducing hierarchy. Giving greater salience to long-term strategic thinking in MEA through a dedicated policy planning section would act as a check on “short termism” and would balance against the everyday dominance of the Foreign Secretary. At the same time, MEA needs to develop stronger ties to related government ministries, particularly the economic ministries, the Ministry of Home Affairs (which deals with issues such as visa issuance and internal security), and, above all, the Defense Ministry. This would entail regular meetings of the Foreign Secretary with his counterparts in other ministries and resuming, even deepening, MEA’s secondment of officers to these ministries as well as agencies such as the National Security Council (NSC). MEA also needs to improve communication with other agencies but even more so with Indian and foreign business and civil society at home and abroad. The increase in horizontal consultations and coordination, too, would militate against the deeply hierarchical nature of MEA which, by erecting strong walls of separation from other departments, has managed to preserve the extraordinary role of the Foreign Secretary on issues related to India’s external relations.

The most pressing reform at the organizational level, however, is to address the severe shortage of Foreign Service officers by dramatically increasing recruitment. As we noted, nearly half a million men and women take the annual examination. Of this number, only 1000 are offered positions in the top services, and only 30 or so are offered the Foreign Service: 30 candidates out of half a million, or 6 out of 100,000 candidates, most of who have at least two university degrees. This is selectivity of the highest order but arguably far too high. Another possibility is to go outside the examination system, on the model of the private sector, to recruit directly from the top undergraduate and graduate programs through a rigorous process of interviews and group discussions. However, direct recruitment might attract the charge of elitism or even favoritism, and India may not be ready for it. A third method of dealing with personnel shortages is lateral entry of mid-career specialists. Lateral entry would not only boost numbers but also improve expertise on technical matters, making communication and cooperation with other ministries easier. In addition, the increase in numbers would make it easier to weed out underperformers. The Indian government’s sudden announcement in 2019 that it would hire up to ten specialists at the Joint Secretary-level is a sign that lateral entry could become a reality. Unfortunately, the experience with the first attempt at lateral entry was not encouraging: only 10 of 6000 applicants were selected (“Lateral Entry: Over 6,000 Private Sector Specialists Apply for 10 Joint Secretary Posts in Government, Economic Times, August 19, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/lateral-entry-over-6000-private-sector-specialists-apply-for-10-joint-secretary-posts-in-government/articleshow/65459546.cms.”) Strikingly, none of the lateral entries is in the Foreign Service. In sum, the surest way of increasing the size of the IFS is by
expanding entry-level recruitment through the civil service examination: it is a tried and politically well-accepted method.

Increased numbers would help address other organizational deficiencies. MEA headquarters would be better able to deal with its embassies which in turn would be numerically bolstered. IFS officers would be available in larger numbers to be deputed to other ministries and agencies. A larger Foreign Service would also allow MEA to revitalize the policy planning department which has languished in part due to paucity of numbers. Foreign policy capacity requires long-term and deeper study of strategic challenges and instruments. In particular, MEA needs a stronger and more dedicated scenario planning unit. A bigger service would also free officers to take sabbaticals and refresh their skills, with stints at universities and think tanks or even at businesses and NGOs.

There is no absolute standard of policy capacity. In the end, all policy capacity is relative: over time; compared to the quantum deployed by other governments; and in relation to one’s goals and ambitions. India’s foreign policy capacity does not seem to have greatly increased over the past decade, in particular because the size of the Foreign Service has not appreciably grown. Its capacity in relation to the capacity of other countries is unclear, though again in terms of its size the Indian Foreign Service is significantly smaller than that of the leading powers. It does seem too that its policy capacity is out of balance with its increasing international goals and ambitions – again judging by the size of the foreign ministry.

India’s foreign policy capacity is part and parcel of its larger policy incapacity. At the top is India’s broad political incapacity: 545 Members of Parliament (MP) for 1.2 billion people or one MP per 2 million constituents. For the UK and Sri Lanka, the ratio is one MP for roughly 90,000 constituents. The Indian Administrative Service, the premier domestic service, has roughly 5000 officers for 1.2 billion people, one officer per 240,000 people (“India has a Shortage of Nearly 1,500 IAS Officers: Statistic,” Times of India, March 22, 2018, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/shortage-of-nearly-1500-ias-officers-in-country-govt/articleshow/62820064.cms.). In a survey of 50 countries, India’s policemen-to-population ratio was second from the bottom, just above Uganda in 2010; three years later, India was ranked fifth lowest. It has 1.2 judges per 100,000 people whereas the US has 10.8 and Canada and Australia 3-4 (Mody 2013). Perhaps no wonder that India has been described as a “flailing state” (Pritchett 2009).

Policy capacity is certainly not just about numbers of personnel even if that is one measure of capacity. As the Wu et al. framework posits, policy capacity is about competences at three levels – individual officials, government organizations, and system-wide resources and processes. It is also about the transitive relationship between the three levels. India’s foreign policy capacity seems robust at the level of the skills and talents of individual officials but has significant weaknesses at the organizational and systemic level. As others who have studied India’s foreign policy system have suggested, reforms at both levels are vital if India is to play a bigger and more influential role internationally. Well begun is half done: a solid beginning would be to initiate reforms at the organizational level.
This brings us to the judgment noted at the beginning of the paper on the disjuncture between foreign policy boldness in terms of conceptualization and foreign policy caution in terms of implementation. If that judgment is correct, why might it be the case that India is often bold conceptually and cautious practically? Our finding that foreign policy capacity in India is relatively strong at the level of individual competence and relatively weak at the organizational and systemic levels may provide an answer. Talented and skilled individuals can evidently think imaginatively and creatively in response to India’s external challenges; but organizational and systemic constraints lead to watered-down implementation. This is a not unfamiliar lament in public policy studies – the gap between conceptualization and implementation. It may well be the story of Indian foreign policy capacity and effectiveness.

Notes
1. BRICs was later amended to BRICS to include South Africa.
2. See joint communique between China and India at Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). (2015).
3. Grand strategy refers to the combination of military, diplomatic, economic, technological, and cultural resources that a state deploys towards national security. See Hart (1991).
4. For an insider account of foreign policy by another Foreign Secretary, see Saran (2017).
5. Academic studies of Indian public policy more generally are few. For a recent attempt to provide an overview of Indian policymaking, implementation, and evaluation, see Chakrabarti and Sanyal (2017). The book addresses issues of policy capacity – without using that term – throughout the book, but Chapter 5 on “Strengthening Policy Making” is especially relevant.
6. On the weaknesses of Indian foreign policy capacity, see also Miller (2013), 14–19. For a succinct survey of India’s foreign policy and national security apparatus, see Pande (2017), 119–157. On the diplomatic, political, and even organizational culture of the IFS and MEA, see Datta-Ray (2015).
7. While the Ministry of Home Affairs deals largely with internal security, it is part of the foreign policy system in so far as internal and external security are related – which is the case particularly in India’s borderlands and in respect of terrorism which often has foreign links. The Ministry of Home Affairs is also the department that deals with certain categories of visa issuance. On India’s national security system, see the discussion on the institutions, organizational chart, and legal structures in Ogden (2017), 41–56.
8. The hard work and positive qualities of IFS officers notwithstanding, observers also note deficiencies. The heavy workload leads to delays in decision making and render the officers inaccessible for face-to-face meetings with foreign counterparts in Delhi. In addition, IFS officers are thought to be relatively weak analytically on economic and commercial matters as well as highly technical areas, such as military affairs and various functional issues (see Tharoor 2012b, 319–321). On the enormous stress of work, see also Datta-Ray (2015), 71–72.
9. On the nature and causes of apparent decline, see Datta-Ray (2015), 56-59; Rana (2002b), 282–284; Shaffer and Shaffer (2016), 85–86; Tharoor (2012b), 322 and 335–336.
10. As Rana (2014), 29, notes: “…through their performance, most young officials have shown themselves to be highly competent and dedicated….[T]his impression has been reinforced during visits to Indian embassies in different countries, where I encounter confident young officials who are articulate and have mastery of their dossiers. The current generation is equal to the best.”
11. See Foreign Service Institute (2019); Tharoor (2012a); Rana (2002b), 284-288; Datta-Ray (2015), 265, footnote 13 (which references the various readings assigned to trainees). Conventional though current training programmes may be, Indian diplomats originally had only the most rudimentary training, largely based on two years or so abroad at a major university in Europe. See Rasgotra (2016), 61–74. Rasgotra spent his stint at Oxford University.

12. For a sceptical view, see Datta-Ray (2015), 265.

13. Rana concludes, though, that the mid-career programmes, including specialized training in economic and functional areas, except in the early 1990s, has been “neglected”. See Rana (2002b), 287.

14. This is recognized in Rana (2002b), 437 on the need for “contemporary management techniques” and the sharing of best management practices across foreign ministries worldwide (p. 446).

15. Rana (2002b), 285 notes that the Indian Institute of Management, Bengaluru, conducts a special course for the recruits.

16. Datta-Ray notes though that no one from the regular foreign service wanted to go to North Korea. See Datta-Ray (2015), 63.

17. India’s population is estimated to peak at 1.66 billion in 2050. See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). India will then be the most populous country in the world.

18. See also Rana (2002b), 83–84 and 267–269 and Datta-Ray (2015), 83.

19. See also Rana (2002b), 260–264 for a more extended discussion of the pyramidal structure and the concentration of power in the Foreign Secretary.

20. On the rise of paradiplomacy in India, see Ratna (2013) and Wyatt (2017), 106–124.

21. See Rana (2002b), 279 on the insulation of MEA from politics.

22. This is noted in Rana (2014), 25.

23. See Rana (2002b), 34, 37, 252, on the IFS sense of superiority going back to its origins. See also Datta-Ray (2015), 55–58 on the service’s status decline.

24. Informal interviews conducted by the author over the years. But also see Rana (2002b), 271–274 on the challenges of MEA’s relations with other government agencies.

25. See “Distinguished Lectures,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures.htm, for the entire list of lectures. They include a few lectures by non-diplomats.

26. A partial exception is the External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, who does occasionally tweet in Hindi. Given the ministry’s preference for English, it is quite likely that the audience MEA has in mind, beyond English-speaking Indians, is outside India—other governments, other publics, and the Indian diaspora rather than the vast mass of Indians.

27. Public diplomacy events are fairly rare. Of course, every Indian embassy celebrates Independence Day, 15 August, and Republic Day, 26 January, and some key religious holidays such as Diwali and Id. The biggest effort at cultural diplomacy was the “Festival of India” series organized in the late 1980s during the prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi. Currently, these are organized by the Ministry of Culture and not by MEA. See Ministry of Culture (2019). See also Rana (2002b), 161–164.

28. See also the report published by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on Indian IR (2009).

29. On research funding to various academic areas, see Gayithri and Bairagya (2017), 402–484.

30. Rana (2002b), 362 on the worry about the anti-state attitude of NGOs.

31. For instance, MEA worked closely with the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) on climate change. See Bagchi (2016a).

32. See the “Contents” in Malone, Mohan, and Raghavan (2015). On MEA’s relationship to NGOs, Rana notes: “…contacts with NGOs are as yet absent, and the role they play internationally is not yet grasped [by MEA].” See Rana (2002b), 275.
33. Rana (2002b), 189–190 on the increase in passports issued and the problem of corruption.

34. The number of corruption complaints against the IFS varies. The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) reports 171 in 2013, 268 in 2015, and 228 in 2017. See Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), “Annual Report 2013,” “Annual Report 2015,” “Annual Report 2017,” CVC, Government of India, http://www.cvc.nic.in/?q=reports/annual-report.

35. In 2010, it was ranked second lowest: “India has Lowest Police Population Ratios in the World,” The Hans India, July 29, 2016, https://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/National/2016-07-29/India-has-lowest-police-population-ratios-in-the-world/245425 (accessed February 17, 2019). India’s rank improved by 2013: “India’s Ratio of 138 Police Personnel per Lakh of Population Fifth Lowest Among 71 Countries,” Economic Times, July 13, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indias-ratio-of-138-police-personnel-per-lakh-of-population-fifth-lowest-among-71-countries/articleshow/48264737.cms (accessed February 17, 2019).

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ORCID

Kanti Bajpai http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2518-1613

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