
UNIT – 4 MAKING OF INDIA’S FOREIGN POLICY: INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit seeks to acquaint the students with the institutions and mechanisms involved in the making of India’s foreign policy. After reading this Unit, the students should be able to:

- Understand the complexities in the making of India’s foreign policy;
- Appreciate the role of different governmental institutions in making of India’s foreign policy;
- Evaluate the role of policy think tanks in providing valuable inputs for the making of India’s foreign policy; and
- Explain the mechanism of foreign policy making in India

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Making of India’s foreign policy is a complex and long drawn process. A host of individuals, institutions and experts with domain knowledge and technical support staff is involved in it. Persuasions for adoption of a particular policy alternative may come from any quarter but the final product in terms of concrete policy decision of the Ministry of External Affairs is taken only after

wide ranging discussions and weighing probable pros and cons of opting for a particular course of action. On a broader scale, the framework of making of India's foreign policy is ordained by the adoption of parliamentary system of government in the country. In this system, though the policy measures are initiated by the executive, the final approval for the adoption and execution of a policy needs to be obtained from the legislature. That way, some sort of accountability is sought to be established for those who are at the helms of steering the external relations of the country. What follows next is an elaborate discussion on complexities, actors, institutions and mechanisms involved in the making of foreign policy in India.

4.2 COMPLEXITIES IN MAKING OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

For a layman, foreign policy of India is made by the officials belonging to the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) sitting in the majestic ambience of South Block on the Raisina Hills in New Delhi. However, such an impression of the making of India's foreign policy tells only part story of the whole process. As a matter of fact, making of India's foreign policy, and for that matter, foreign policy of any other country as well, is a very cumbersome process consuming so much of time and energy. Moreover, making of consensual policies like the foreign policy in a country including India is more in the nature of incremental additions or deletions than carrying out a radical transformation in an existing policy, though there may arise occasions when creative policy options might be needed to respond to a novel situation. For instance, India for long has been following the policy of a close friendship with the former Soviet Union. But when this giant monolith fell apart leading to emergence of the United States as the sole super power in the world, India's foreign policy found itself in a tricky position to respond to such a novel unfolding of events in the international relations. Nevertheless, such situations are rare, and in most of the times, foreign policy making involves bringing about incremental changes in the existing ones to suit the requirements of a transformed global scenario.

Foreign policy making in India takes place at different levels involving different sets of peoples and institutions in varying capacities. For example, foreign policy in India is made at two distinct levels: macro and micro. Similarly, the involvement of various institutions and individuals in this process is not of same degree and scale. While many of the key foreign policy making institutions and individuals are required to give their hundred percent at the highest scale of their competence in order to work out the nuances of the policy, certain institutions are required to just put their stamp on the policy in order to either meet some statutory requirement or give greater legitimacy and acceptability to the policy.

Foreign policy making at macro level involves the higher bodies and individuals responsible for giving overall direction and control of the structures and processes of government in the country. The

institutions and individuals taking part in the process of foreign policy making at this level are the ones who are not expected to be specialists in the theories and practices of diplomacy and foreign policy so as to give their specific inputs into the process of making of foreign policy. On the contrary, they are generalists in their perspective and the criteria on which they try to assess the veracity of the foreign policy are the broader national interests to which the policy is made. The most important institution at this level is the Parliament which seeks to review and approve all the policy measures of government from the perspective of broader national interests. Whatsoever scientific scrutiny of the foreign policy is done at this level is done by the Parliamentary Committees having some members who might have specialized knowledge of external affairs of the country. Otherwise, foreign policy making at this level is more formalistic than analytical in nature.

The real actions with regard to the making of foreign policy in India takes place at the micro level. At the core of this level lies the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) which gets active support and inputs from the scientific and technical institutions and individuals working in the field of strategic and foreign affairs. The inputs for making, unmaking or modifying a foreign policy alternative may come from any quarter but the destination of all such inputs is the relevant division in the MEA. Apart from MEA, another significant institution working very closely with the MEA on the foreign policy making is the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) which, in fact, works as the conscience keeper of the external relations of India. In the times of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, PMO is sometimes seen to be working as parallel organization to MEA in running the foreign affairs of the country. Still, during the tenure of other Prime Ministers as well, role of PMO in foreign policy making has been very critical. Thus, right from evolving the blueprint of the foreign policy to giving the final shape to such a policy, the institutions and individuals working at the micro level play the most important roles.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the complexities in making of India's foreign policy.

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4.3 INSTITUTIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN INDIA

In the complicated process of foreign policy making, different institutions discharge their responsibilities directly or indirectly. The institutions that are statutorily ordained to be in charge of running the foreign affairs of the country, such as MEA, act as the pivot of the foreign policy making. However, since the MEA cannot be the repository of all the knowledge, inputs and insights on diverse issues and challenges facing India on its external frontiers, a number of other actors are also assigned certain responsibilities in the making of the country's foreign policy.

4.3.1 Ministry of External Affairs

Foreign policy making in India begins and concludes with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Staffed primarily with the members of the IFS, MEA is headed by the Minister of External Affairs on the political side and Foreign Secretary on the administrative side. Foreign Secretary is flanked by Secretary (East), Secretary (West), Secretary (Economic Affairs) and Secretary (CPV and Overseas Indian Affairs). Foreign Secretary and each of the Secretaries head and coordinate a number of Divisions and agencies. Though the administrative structure of the MEA is patterned on the standard organizational structure of the ministries of Government of India, there exists sufficient degree of flexibility in the organizational structure and functional procedures of the ministry. All the initiatives for foreign policy making are received and processed in the MEA. Despite having its own well equipped research and development wing, inputs for making of foreign policy are also received from a number of both governmental and non-governmental institutions and individuals. The officials of the ministry are well trained, experienced, talented and analytically profound individuals who usually have knack of the finer issues of diplomacy and international affairs. The basic operating framework of the ministry is provided by the broad vision of national interests of India which all the policy decisions and activities of MEA seek to serve. Important inputs in the making of India's foreign policy are also provided by the external intelligence of the country, namely, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Though the controlling agency of RAW is the Cabinet Secretariat, its functions very much relate to the core activities of MEA. Thus, it would be fine to call MEA as the pivot around which the foreign policy making of India revolves.

4.3.2 Prime Minister's Office

Under the Parliamentary form of government, Prime Minister is the executive head of the government. In that capacity, it is expected that s/he would be well versed with the policy initiatives of the government emanating at different levels. Given that foreign policy is one of the most

significant aspects of governmental activities, Prime Ministers have invariably been very alert and participative in the process of foreign policy making. Hence, after the MEA, the next important institution playing key role in the making of India's foreign policy is the PMO. It, in fact, is the secretariat that provides technical and secretarial support to Prime Minister to enable him keep track of the activities of government and provide valuable inputs and guidance to the different agencies. Insofar as making of foreign policy is concerned, PMO gets to play a more active role especially during the reign of activist Prime Ministers such as Narendra Modi. Even in routine course of action, the policy decisions taken by the MEA are presented before the PMO for perusal and approval of the Prime Minister in case he does not have any modifications to suggest in those policies. The foreign policy initiatives evolved by MEA come to their final shape only when they get approval from the Prime Minister. Thus, PMO happens to be the critical agency that provides finality to the foreign policy initiatives.

4.3.3 National Security Advisor

Prime Minister's take on the matters of foreign policy is generally determined by the inputs provided by National Security Advisor (NSA). NSA is the executive head of the National Security Council (NSC) created during the reign of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1998. Though demand for the creation of NSC has been made quite often even since the period of Nehru, it could not be created for obvious reasons. In the absence of NSC, Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) used to be the political wing to take decision on the matters of foreign policy and national security. In the place of NSA, all the Prime Ministers before Vajpayee used to have one of his/her close confident substituting for NSA to advise the Prime Ministers on critical issues of national interests. Contemporaneously NSC is headed by the Prime Minister and has a number of political and administrative appointees as members to formulate suggestions for the government on issues of national security including foreign policy. However, in the main, the substantive responsibility of NSC is carried on the shoulders of the NSA who remains in touch with the Prime Minister one on one to keep him abreast of the latest happenings inside and outside the country. In present times, NSA seems to be the extended persona of the Prime Minister given his very activist role in shaping the security and foreign policies of the government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy acumen and forays are presumably based on the inputs provided by NSA Ajit Doval.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discern the administrative organisations involved in the foreign policy making in India.

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4.3.4 Cabinet Committee on Security

It is a well known fact that in the parliamentary system of government, collective responsibility of the cabinet is taken as the sacrosanct principle. However, such a collective responsibility could be sought only when the cabinet takes collective decisions on all the issues and matters before it. In this regard, the committee entrusted with the task of taking collective decision relating to the issues of national security and foreign policy is known as the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). It is headed by the Prime Minister and consists of all the important ministers heading the ministries critical to national security of the country. In India, as a customary practice, the decisions relating to India’s foreign policy and finalized at the level of MEA, PMO, etc. are placed before the CCS for its consideration and final approval. Though CCS has never been heard of reversing any of the foreign policy decisions initiated by MEA and finalized by PMO, it surely retains the right of discussing the issues at hand and members could indeed offer valuable suggestions if they feel strongly on that. But, on the whole, role of the CCS in making of the foreign policy decisions in India are more formal and customary than substantive one having major bearing on the decisions already taken. Nevertheless, CCS remains an important institution of foreign policy making within the broader framework of parliamentary system of the country.

4.3.5 Parliament

Parliament is the custodian of public conscience in India. It not only acts as the fountainhead out of which the government gets its shape but also remains the pivot of ensuring accountability of the government throughout its existence. So, whatever the government decides to do or not to do, it has to take approval of parliament. That way, most, if not all, of the decisions relating to the foreign policy of the country is placed before the two houses of parliament for their consideration and approval. Generally, parliament contributes to making of the foreign policy of India in three ways. Firstly, while debating the decisions of government, members of parliament articulate different perspectives on the subject. Apart from advancing arguments in support of the government’s decisions, members also express their critical appreciation of the policy that help the government get

the alternative perspectives to its decisions. Thus, parliamentary debates tend to articulate the wider range of public opinion on a given policy decision of the government. Secondly, on occasions, parliament also acts to suggest modifications in a particular policy decision of the government. Though such suggestions have very less chance of getting through the house, they, nonetheless, make government aware of feelings of the members on the issue. Finally, when parliament accords its approval to the policy decisions of the government, such decisions become consensual approach of the country towards a given subject and tend to carry much more weight than a policy measure offered without the approval of parliament. Thus, though parliament plays only indirect role in the making of India's foreign policy, that role is unquestionably quite eminent.

4.3.6 Parliamentary Committees

More substantive role in the making of India's foreign policy is played by parliamentary committees than parliament itself. Obviously, parliament's role as an institution of foreign policy making is quite compromised for two reasons. One, parliament as a deliberative body is too large in size to be able to play any meaningful role in contributing to the quality or content of the policy. Two, members of parliament might also lack technical or scientific acumen to understand the nuances of foreign affairs and make critical contribution to its formulation. Hence, conventionally, provisions have been made in the parliamentary procedures for parliamentary committees to deal with such issues in detail. Parliamentary committees are in fact the advisory bodies consisting of members drawn from both the houses of parliament. Initially, there existed the consultative committees of parliament to give their inputs on the issues of foreign policy making. With the formation of standing committees of parliament, Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs has become the most important committee to look into the issues of foreign affairs on behalf of the parliament. Consisting of members of both the houses, this committee keeps a constant watch on the working of the MEA and reviews the policies and decisions taken by the ministry with regard to the external affairs of the country. Thus, parliamentary committees also play significant though indirect role in the making of foreign policy of India.

4.3.7 Policy Think Tanks

In the making of India's foreign policy, policy think tanks have special role to play. These think tanks are non-governmental, non-profit organisations engaged in study and research on different aspects of India's strategic and foreign affairs. Contemporaneously, important of such think tanks are Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). These think tanks are actively engaged in carrying out scholarly research and surveys on different aspects of India's strategic and foreign policies. They publish occasional research papers and policy briefs to make policy interventions in the formulation of foreign policy of the country. Staffed by professional

researchers as well as former diplomats and practitioners of strategic and foreign affairs of the country, these think tanks carry the unique blend of theory and practice of foreign affairs. The vitality of these think tanks in the formulation of India's security and foreign policies could be gauged from the fact that a number of individuals working with these organisations have now been given important responsibilities in the present government. At the same time, these organisations are also roped in by the government to act as the co-sponsors of important policy dialogues such as Raisina Dialogue on strategic and foreign policies of India.

The role of these think tanks in the making of India's foreign policy is generally consultative and advisory in nature. In the course of their researches and studies on different aspects of India's strategic and foreign policies, they accumulate a treasure trove of valuable knowledge and insights. It is these knowledge and insights that become the basic strength of these organisations. Governments generally seek advice of these think tanks in times of unconventional circumstances when there does not exist any past precedent to fall back upon for making of the foreign policy. At times, these think tanks come out with their innovative analysis of a situation which might catch the attention of the policy makers. Think tanks have been part of American policy making process since very long. But in India they are not a very old phenomenon. But looking at the ways they work and contribute to the making of India's foreign policy, it is quite reassuring that these non-governmental organisations could surely be a valuable asset in the making of the country's foreign policy. Though certain degree of caution might be required to involve the think tanks in the process of foreign policy making, they in no way can be written off from the process of decision making in the contemporary times.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the political organisations involved in the foreign policy making in India.

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4.4 MECHANISM OF FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN INDIA

There exists a comprehensive mechanism of foreign policy making in India. This mechanism works in a seamless manner in such a way that there does not appear to be any scope for any rupture in the beads that combine together to give final shape to what is called as foreign policy of the country. In this circular mechanism, the unfolding circumstances or other global persuasions keep on adding new inputs on the agenda of the foreign policy makers who process and update the existing framework of foreign policy. However, as has already been pointed out, foreign policy of India has generally been a consensual exercise where there does not exist much scope for radical transformation in the policy. On very rare occasions, foreign policy decisions of a government are challenged and opposed by a wider mass of people. Otherwise, incremental transformations in the subsisting foreign policy are either not noticed or noticed by certain degree of indifference by general public. Yet, the mechanism of foreign policy making in India needs to be alert and active all the times in order offer quick responses to the unfolding international situations.

The mechanism of foreign policy making in India revolves around the MEA which is the primary institution for formulation of India's foreign policy. The existing foreign policy framework provides the operational base for the ministry to activate the mechanism of foreign policy making. Inputs for the making of a foreign policy decision may come from any quarter – both official as well as non-official. Once concrete inputs are received with regard to certain aspect of India's national interests including its defense, economic interests, vision of international politics, territorial integrity, difficulties before India diaspora in any part of the world, the mechanism of foreign policy making comes into action. After background study and feedback from the concerned experts on the subject, a definite policy alternative is evolved at the level of offices of the ministry. Such proposals are then placed before the minister of external affairs for her perusal and testing the political connotations of the alternative in accordance with the philosophy and ideology of the party in power. Once, the minister gives her nod for the given policy alternative, the same is forwarded to the PMO for consideration of the Prime Minister.

Since Prime Minister is the overall custodian of India's relations with the rest of the world, the policy proposal of the MEA undergoes close scrutiny of the prime minister. In this exercise, the prime minister is assisted in the main by the NSA who is supposed to take holistic view of the country's security and foreign policies with a view not only to rule out any inconsistency between the two but also to make sure they work in tandem with each other to secure the national interests of the country in full measure. Additionally, the prime minister is also expected to assess the financial, strategic and political implications of the policy proposal in order to make that acceptable to all the members of cabinet once the proposal goes to the cabinet or its committee for discussion and final approval. Thus, by way of scrutiny on the part of the prime minister, the foreign policy proposal, in fact, gets

vetted by a wide range of stakeholders. At this level, the proposal is liable for any kind of modification or addition or deletion without much ruckus given the preliminary stage at which the proposal is pending.

After getting approval of the prime minister, the policy proposal goes to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for wider discussion amongst the political heavyweights who constitute the CCS. In this committee, not only the foreign minister is there to respond to the queries of any of the members of the Committee but are also other important ministers such as ministers of finance, home, defence, among others. These ministers seek to evaluate the policy proposal from the perspective of their particular ministries so that it does not contradict or come in the way of any policy followed by that ministry. At this level, defence for the policy proposal comes not only from the minister of external affairs but also the prime minister himself given his previous consent for that policy. Generally, the policy proposals of MEA are not rejected, if not modified, at this level as all the important stakeholders have already extended their approval for the policy. Nevertheless, the consideration of the policy proposal at the level of the CCS is a major link in the mechanism of foreign policy making in India given its statutory and political meaning in the future processing of the policy.

Though most, if not all, of the policy proposals of MEA get converted into foreign policy for being put into practice after their approval by the CCS, at times certain proposals are placed before the houses of parliament for its consideration and passage. The presentation of foreign policy proposals before the houses of parliament is a tactical move on the part of the government to garner wider public support for such a proposal or to ward off any ensuing opposition to such proposals by certain sections of society. Anyway, with or without its presentation before the houses of parliament, a policy proposal of the MEA becomes part of India's foreign policy after its approval by the CCS. Afterwards, that policy is put into practice with a close watch on its impact and ramifications. Then, any measure of foreign policy, that policy also becomes a tool to serve the national interests of the country with possibility of its review as and when valuable inputs are available for its reconsideration. Thus, the mechanism of foreign policy making in India is quite elaborate and full of checks and balances in order to ensure quality check of the policy at more than one level.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the mechanism of making of India's foreign policy.

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

The utility and veracity of the institutions and mechanism of foreign policy making in India have been proved beyond doubt by looking at their working over the years. But on a close scrutiny of these institutions and mechanisms, two significant trends could be underlined. Firstly, foreign policy in any country has generally been a matter of consensus amongst all the sections of society as well as academia. But in view of the vast diversity in the social, economic, linguistic and territorial dimensions of India, there arises occasions with regard to specific policy measures, when certain sections of people try to look at the issue from a parochial perspective casting aspersion on the sanctity of national interest. In such cases, the government of India needs to be assertive enough to push for the policy which it deems appropriate despite spirited opposition to such policies. In other words, there is need for certain degree of stridency in the institutions and mechanism of foreign policy making in India so that the policies aimed at protecting and promoting national interests of the country are carried through despite the opposition of certain vested sections of society. Secondly, for a long period of time, Indian foreign policy has generally been reactive to the unfolding of circumstances both within and outside the country. Such a policy perspective need not be the preferred method of conducting a foreign policy especially for an aspiring great power like India. Almost all the major countries seeking greater role for themselves in the international relations have been found to be pursuing a proactive foreign policy. Though it is true that nothing can be said with certainty in the realm of foreign policy and international relations given the unforeseen turn of events within and outside the country, yet it would probably be better method of conducting a foreign policy to be proactive than reactive even during the normal times

In sum, though the institutions and mechanism of making of India's foreign policy have been doing fairly well, there is need for a relook at the structural vibrancy and functional dynamism of these bodies in order to shake them from their conventional slumber. The contemporary international scenario is witnessing rapid changes both in terms of reemergence of maverick leaders in different parts of the world as well as the rapid advances in the tools and techniques of conducting the foreign policy. On the strength of the support coming from cutting edge inventions in the fields of science

and technology, countries are trying to achieve the seemingly unachievable objectives of their foreign policy. In such a scenario, the institutions and mechanism of India's foreign policy making cannot remain closeted within their comfort zones at the South Block. They need to be creative enough to not only react well to the unfolding situations but also imaginative enough to perceive or imagine the hypothetical state of affairs in the times to come so that the foreign policy establishment can be readied to serve the national interests of the country well.

4.6 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

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Nalini Kant Jha et al (eds.), *India's Foreign Policy: Emerging Challenges*, New Delhi: Neha Publishers, 2012

Muchkund Dubey, *India's Foreign Policy*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007

Annpurna Nautiyal, *Challenges to India's Foreign Policy in the New Era*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006

4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Your answer need to focus on the interplay of different factors lying at the root of making of India's foreign policy. Your answer should be based on Section 4.2

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) The answer should emphasize upon the role of Ministry of External Affairs, Prime Minister's Office and National Security Advisor. Carefully read Section 4.3 to write your answer.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Highlight the role of institutions such as parliament, parliamentary committees and cabinet committee on security in your answer. Read carefully and blend subsections 4.3.4, 4.3.5 and 4.3.6 to write your answer.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- 1) Your answer should include explanation of the distinct role of different agencies and linkages in the role performance by them, as has been delineated in Section 4.4.