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**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**REFORMS NEEDED IN THE MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS**

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REFORMS NEEDED IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Context

- India's consistent economic growth, political stability, and an independent foreign policy have established the nation as a prominent player on the global stage. However, sustaining and enhancing this position **necessitates significant reforms in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** to address existing gaps and inefficiencies.

About the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

- **Establishment:** Formed in 1947 as the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, renamed in 1948 as the Ministry of External Affairs.
- **Responsibilities:**
 - ◆ Shapes foreign policy and maintains diplomatic relations with other nations and international organizations.
 - ◆ Oversees India's embassies, high commissions, and consulates worldwide.
 - ◆ Monitors international developments and safeguards India's national security interests.
 - ◆ Negotiates international treaties, promotes trade, and strengthens cultural ties.
 - ◆ Protects Indian nationals abroad and ensures their welfare.

Challenges Facing the MEA

- **Limited Resources and Budget Allocation:** The MEA budget is consistently below 1% of the Union Budget, constraining India's diplomatic missions.
 - ◆ In contrast, countries like China allocate significantly higher budgets for their foreign services.
- **Staffing and Human Resources Deficit:** The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is severely understaffed, with about 850 IFS officers managing 193 diplomatic missions.
 - ◆ Comparatively, the U.S. has around 14,500 foreign service officers, the U.K. 4,600, China more than 4,000 and Russia 4,500.
 - ◆ Although the annual intake of IFS officers has increased to 32-35, it remains inadequate.
- **Structural Inefficiencies:** Small and fragmented divisions lead to overlapping responsibilities and inefficiencies.
 - ◆ For example: The PAI Division (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran) and Central Europe Division (includes Türkiye) exhibit overlapping and misaligned mandates.
- **Technological Lag:** India's efforts in leveraging digital tools for diplomatic and consular services are inconsistent, especially in the era of digital diplomacy.
- **Bureaucratic Complexities:** Coordination between the MEA and other ministries often faces delays due to procedural bottlenecks.
- **Regional Capacity Constraints:** Missions in regions like Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia suffer from resource and manpower shortages, hindering strategic engagement.
- **Housing Challenges:** Limited housing resources for domestic officers can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced morale, and difficulty attracting talent to domestic postings. This disparity may affect productivity and the overall perception of fairness within the organization.
- **Rotational Posting System:** The rotational posting system does not align language training with subsequent assignments, underutilizing officers' language skills and diminishing the return on investment in training.

Recent Key Reforms and Initiatives in the MEA

Structural and Administrative Reforms:

- **New Divisions:** Specialized divisions like Indo-Pacific, Cyber Diplomacy, and Development Partnership Administration (DPA) address emerging challenges.
- **Integrated Approach:** Collaboration with ministries like Defence and Commerce ensures cohesive strategies.

- **Expanded Cadre Strength:** Lateral entry of domain experts and technical specialists supplements the IFS.

Citizen-Centric Reforms:

- **Passport Seva Kendra (PSK):** Transformed passport services, reducing processing times and enhancing accessibility.
- **Videsh Bhavan:** Consolidates regional offices, streamlining consular services.
- **MADAD Portal:** Provides efficient grievance redressal for Indian citizens abroad.

Strengthening Diaspora Engagement

- **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD):** Celebrates contributions of overseas Indians and fosters dialogue on diaspora issues.
- **Know India Programme (KIP):** Builds cultural connections with young diaspora members.
- **OCI Card Enhancements:** Streamlined processes for the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card.

Economic Diplomacy and Trade Expansion

- **Focus on FTAs:** Negotiating Free Trade Agreements with the EU, UK, and others.
- **Economic Diplomacy Division:** Promotes investments and supports businesses exploring foreign markets.
- **Development Partnership Administration:** Funds infrastructure and capacity-building projects in developing nations.

Regional and Strategic Diplomacy

- **Act East Policy:** Strengthens ties with ASEAN and develops connectivity projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project.
- **Neighborhood First Policy:** Deepens engagement with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka through high-level visits and development projects.
- **Quad and Indo-Pacific Strategy:** Positions India as a key player in a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

Crisis Management and Humanitarian Assistance

- **Operation Ganga:** Evacuated thousands of Indian students from Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- **Operation Samudra Setu & Vande Bharat Mission:** Repatriated Indian citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Humanitarian Aid:** Provided relief to nations like Türkiye (earthquake assistance) and Afghanistan (food and medicine).

Suggested Reforms in the MEA

- **Enhancing Budgetary Support:** Increase allocation to at least 2% of the Union Budget. Link funding to measurable diplomatic outcomes.
- **Expanding the IFS Cadre:** Double the cadre strength within the next decade. Recruit experts from fields like economics, technology, and environmental sciences.
- **Embracing Digital Diplomacy:** Integrate AI and big data to monitor geopolitical trends. Expand e-governance platforms like e-Visa.
- **Strengthening Regional Diplomacy:** Open more embassies in underrepresented regions. Establish economic diplomacy cells in key missions.
- **Decentralization and Coordination:** Create regional MEA offices in key Indian cities. Form inter-ministerial task forces for seamless policy execution.
- **Capacity Building and Training:** Introduce specialized courses on emerging areas like cyber diplomacy. Collaborate with think tanks for strategic research and policy formulation.

Conclusion

- As India's global footprint expands, the MEA must evolve to meet the demands of modern diplomacy. Addressing resource shortages, restructuring its organization, leveraging technology, and enhancing training will ensure that the MEA remains a robust instrument of India's foreign policy.

**Mains Practice Question**

Critically examine the structural and operational challenges faced by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in effectively managing India's growing global engagements.

