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Analysing Diplomatic Institutions to Understand Foreign-Policy Behaviour: A Sociological Approach to India's Diplomacy in a Changing World

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Introduction

Scholarship has struggled to define India's foreign policy, often seen as a combination of antinomies, such as realism and idealism (Jaffrelot 2008). To a large extent, this difficulty derives from the fact that the policy of non-alignment, which signification has raised many debates among both practitioners and scholars since its elaboration (Chaudhuri 2014; Raghavan 2010), has become more difficult to implement in the post-Cold War era. Many analysts point out India's willingness to become a great power, while at the same time acknowledging the historical weight of non-alignment. Nevertheless, few studies seek to demonstrate the link that exists between this inherited principle of conduct and the current orientations of India's foreign policy. In order to contribute to the understanding of India's foreign policy, this paper provides a sociological analysis of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The starting assumption of this paper is that there is a correlation between the processes of foreign policy-making and its content[1]. The questions investigated are the following: how have India's diplomatic practices and discourses evolved? What do these evolutions reveal on India's diplomatic style?

Methodologically, I rely on the tools provided by the sociology of institutions. The empirical portion of this paper is based on about 50 interviews conducted with retired officials and serving diplomats in Delhi, between September and December 2013. More specifically, I explore in this article the institutionalisation of India's MEA, understood as a relational, contingent and continuous process by which norms, beliefs and practices solidify (Hmed and Laurens 2011, p.132). Institutionalisation is treated both as a dependant and an independent variable. On the one hand, I argue that institutionalisation is made of a combination of socio-historical, cultural and strategic dimensions. On the other hand, this process determines India's diplomatic style, defined as a way of acting internationally, which manifests itself through a wide range of performed practices and discourses, such as political postures, visions of the world and discursive constructions of the State's identity (Macé 2010).

In the remainder of this article, I first discuss the added value of using the sociology of institutions as a methodological tool for this study. In the following section, I highlight the structural characteristics that have shaped India's diplomatic culture since the genesis of the MEA. The third part then shows the effect of the institutional conversion of the MEA in the post-Cold War era on India's diplomatic practices and discourses. The last section focuses on the case of India's diplomacy in the Gulf and highlights the causes, manifestations and effects of India's prudential diplomatic style.

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[1] This assumption is similar to analyses made on the instruments of public policies. See Lascoumes, Pierre, and Patrick Le Galès (2005), 'L'action Publique Saisie Par Ses Instruments', in *Gouverner par les instruments* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po), pp. 11–44.

I. Three Dimensions of Institutionalisation

Against the myth of the dissolution of the State, the sociology of institutions assumes that political and administrative institutions structure collective action (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985). Institutions are defined as a 'set of shared practices, particular tasks, rituals and rules of conduct, as well as beliefs and representations that concern these practices, define their signification and justify their existence' (Lagroye, François, Sawicki 2006, p.141). While stability, recurrence and routines are seen as central components of an institution, the institution is not seen *a priori* as a factor of resistance to change, but rather as a social field that gives space to social transformations (Lagroye et François 2011, p.18). Applied to the case of India's bureaucracy, this approach allows to avoid two main pitfalls: the first would be to assume the decline of the MEA, caused by the rise of new actors in foreign policy, without questioning the adaptation of the functions and roles of the diplomats (Michelmann, Soldatos 1990); the second would be to adopt a functional approach to the MEA's adaptation and therefore overlook the resistances and conflicts that emerge from this process (Mellisen 1999). Drawing on literature from sociology of institutions, this paper isolates three dimensions that constitute the process of institutionalisation: the socio-historical, the cultural and the strategic dimensions.

The Socio-Historical Dimension

The socio-historical dimension of institutionalisation treats institutions not as isolated and a-historical entities, but rather as sociological objects, determined by past history as well as by the societal environment in which they evolve. This implies a double contextualisation of the institution.

First, it appears necessary to take into account the successive historical phases of the institutionalisation process, as it is not a linear process that would follow a singular logic of modernisation or weakening. A particular emphasis is put on the genesis of the institution, considered as an intense moment that structures the institutional culture (Meimon 2011). Other processes contributing to stabilisation or change, such as the process of routinisation or the adoption of radical reforms, are also integrated in the analysis. Second, the socio-historical dimension of institutions integrates the interaction of the institution with its socio-political context and their mutual adjustments. For example, it shows that the establishment of a bureaucracy is often influenced by the context of stiff bureaucratic competition in which it takes place, while also contributing to the creation of new conflicts.

Therefore, a socio-historical analysis of the Indian MEA provides a dynamic understanding of the Ministry and shows complex processes of structuration. It does not only highlight lasting phenomenon like 'path dependency' (Pierson 2000), but it also looks at reproduction mechanisms and logics of change, in order to grasp the 'multiple forms of institutional reproduction' (Bezes and Le Lidec 2011 p.77).

The Cultural Dimension

I adopt Iver Neumann's conception of institutional culture (2002), defined as the dynamic interplay between discourses (preconditions for actions) and practices (socialised patterns of action). Institutional cultures convey shared beliefs, representations of the world and repertoires of collective action that delineate the appropriate behaviours. Therefore, diplomatic institutions are not neutral and provide moral and cognitive frameworks that orient

actions and decisions (March and Olsen, 1989). Here, the sense of culture is close to the notions of '*référentiel*' (Jobert and Muller 1987) and 'policy paradigm' (Hall 1993). But the notion of culture also puts practices, defined as 'socially recognized forms of activity done on the basis of what members learn from other and capable of being done well or badly, correctly and incorrectly' (Neumann 2002, p.627), at the centre of the analysis. In the case of Indian diplomats, this especially implies looking at the evolution of the competences and skills required to adequately perform their work (Neumann 2002). In addition, a particular attention is paid not only to rules, procedures and formal norms, but also to symbolic device, rituals, and ceremonies (Hall and Taylor 1996, p.482).

It has to be stressed that looking at the cultural dimension of an institution does not imply considering the institution as a monolithic entity. Ann Swidler (1986) interestingly defines the institutional culture as a 'tool kit' that actors use to define their strategies and orient their actions. In addition, the stabilisation of an institutional culture is a process that is charged with power (Mayntz and Scharpf 2001) and can always be contested and replaced. These elements point to the strategic dimension of the institutionalisation process.

The Strategic Dimension

The strategic approach to institutions looks at the dialectic existing between the objectified structures of the institutions and the multiple ways agents adapt to the rules and interiorise their roles. Indeed, it is assumed that the actors, depending on their individual resources, their hierarchical position and their skills, contribute to structure and restructure institutions (Mayntz and Scharpf 2001). At the same time though, the individuals are not totally autonomous within the institution. The affiliation to an institution supposes minimal agreement with the inherited practices and discourses that are manifested through ordinary practices and routines.

This approach puts the notion of power at the centre of the institutionalisation process and thus contributes to clarify the two other dimensions just highlighted before. Indeed, the socio-historical and the cultural dimensions tend to describe institutions as homogeneous instruments of collective action and cooperation. By contrast, the strategic dimension of institutionalisation shows the conflicts that are caused by this process (Biland 2011, p.179). This provides a complement to our understanding of Foreign Ministries' adaptations in the context of globalisation. Scholarship generally shows the functional adaptations of Foreign Ministries and stresses the cooperative relations that are built between governments and non-state actors (Hocking 1999), overlooking the consequences of these innovative practices on power relations.

Overall, each of the three dimensions described above provides a partial explanation of the institutionalisation process. The following parts of this paper will look at the three dimensions simultaneously in order to explain the universe of legitimate practices, roles, routines, procedures, discourses and beliefs that emerge from their complex interplay and shape India's diplomatic style.

II. The genesis of the MEA: Structural Contradictions.

In order to analyse the structural trends that have shaped India's diplomatic culture since its genesis in 1947 and their impact on India's external behaviour, this part looks at the initial process of institutionalisation of the MEA. It particularly focuses on two fundamental steps of this process: the creation of the MEA in 1947 and the professionalization of the diplomats.

A Prestigious Diplomatic Culture

The genesis of the Indian MEA was based on two sources of legitimacy that founded the prestige of India's diplomatic culture. The first relates to the import of knowledge and skills from the British Empire. Indeed, the reorganisation of the colonial government in 1935 led to the creation of an External Affairs Department, partly staffed by members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). At the time of India's independence, the new government had to rapidly recruit ICS officers. The latters thus occupied the most prestigious and strategic functions of the State administration, including the MEA, during the first twenty years after the independence of India (Benner 1985; Potter 1996). Having spent some time in the West during their careers as ICS officers, they possessed the skills, languages and manners to behave adequately with their Western counterparts and left a profound influence on the post-colonial administration. In particular, they contributed to shape the belief in the social and professional elitism of India's diplomacy.

The second source of legitimacy came from J. Nehru, as he imposed himself as the principal architect of India's non-alignment policy, playing at the same time a decisional, an ideological and an operational role. Broadly speaking, non-alignment was a nationalist foreign policy, which aimed at ensuring the security, independence and economic development of India (Bajpai, Basit, Krishnappa 2014). It was originally an intuitive policy that was primarily based on Nehru's personal assessments of international situations in order to adjust India's interests to the specificities of circumstances. In order to ensure the implementation of his policy, Nehru held the portfolio of Minister of External Affairs and was directly in contact with the agents of the MEA. His charisma on the international scene and its vociferous style were reflected on Indian diplomats' reputation as tough negotiators and proud nationalists[2].

Therefore, the MEA's prestigious diplomatic culture was based on two contradictory tendencies: the nationalist and monopolistic leadership exercised by Nehru contrasted with the pro-Western feelings of the former ICS officers. This contradiction in India's diplomatic culture influenced the structuration of the bureaucracy, as well as behaviour patterns and methods of work.

A Weak Bureaucratic Structure

As a consequence of Nehru's willingness to keep the MEA under his own control as well as low political interest in Foreign Affairs, the Indian MEA was initially constituted with low material and human capacities[3] (Tharoor 1982; Malone 2011). Without going into the details of India's bureaucratic architecture, it is necessary to underline that this has created deficiencies in the formal bureaucratic organization and especially coordination and

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[2] Interview with a retired diplomat and former Foreign Secretary, October 2013.
[3] India's diplomatic corps consists of around 1,750 officers, which includes roughly 750 IFS Grade-A officers, 250 IFS Grade-B personnel, military attachés, and other officers. It is almost the equivalent of Singapor and far smaller than the Brazilian, the Chinese and the South African diplomatic corps.

communication issues. The other consequence is that the institutional culture of the MEA has provided the diplomat with individual autonomy that is probably greatest in India than in bigger Foreign Ministries. The classical reverse effect of large individual autonomy within a bureaucracy is that the diplomats who enjoy influence and power within the bureaucracy do not have interest in reforming its structures. In the absence of sufficient political clout from the political leadership at the centre, no radical reform of the existing bureaucratic framework has been implemented so far, the expansion of the Foreign Ministry initiated in 2007 being an exception.

Objectives and Effects of Professionalization

The professionalization of India's diplomacy was based on two principal objectives. The first was the reproduction of the elitist patterns of behaviour initiated by ICS officers. This was ensured by the elitist examination and formation that were set up in 1947 with the creation of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). And in fact, interviews have showed that the formation of the diplomatic corps has put more emphasis on how to socialise and interact with the other agents of the State than on issues of policy-making and diplomacy.[4] In addition, the bureaucracy has encouraged the formation of generalist profiles at the expense of technical or regional specialisation, as illustrated by the low level of the diplomats in foreign languages.

The second objective of professionalization was to ensure the monopolisation of expertise on International Relations by the MEA. This has led to the isolation of the MEA from other bureaucracies, as illustrated by the reluctance of the MEA to opening commercial postings to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers from the Commerce Ministry. The contradiction of the monopolisation of IR expertise by the diplomats is the weakness of the Research and Planning division of the MEA (Mehta 2010, p. 170). This comes to a large extent from the particular conception of diplomacy as an elitist and 'practical' knowledge that is learned through experience during the career in IFS. Although this has evolved over the last few years, Indian diplomats have been very reluctant in seeking outside opinions on matters of India's foreign policy.

These trends have had a direct effect on the implementation of foreign policy. Indeed, both bureaucratic weaknesses and individual autonomy have contributed to ad hocism of decision-making and implementation (Tharoor 1982, p. 33) and created discontinuities, sometimes incoherence in India's foreign policy (Rana 2007, p. 63). In addition, the IFS appears to have limited skills in the spheres of interpretation of international relations and long-term projection of India's interests. As a consequence, India's diplomacy has generally favoured the implementation of foreign policy in broad, general and consensual terms and relies on a few proactive individuals for the elaboration of boldest initiatives. Lastly, the intellectual isolation of the MEA might be the main factor that explains the Indian diplomats' strategic and cognitive reliance on the non-alignment paradigm even until today.

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[4] Interviews conducted in Delhi in October-December 2013 and particularly with a former director of the Foreign Service Institute.

III. The Adaptation of the MEA to Environmental Changes: In search for an Identity

Changes in India's foreign policy started to take place slowly after Nehru's death in 1964. Nevertheless, this part pays attention to the early 1990s, a period that is particularly significant as it represents a 'critical juncture' for India's foreign policy making.

Factors of Change

Since the early 1990s, a series of international and domestic factors have had significant effects on India's diplomacy and have increased the necessity of adapting diplomatic practices and discourses to the new reality. These factors are the following:
- Plural governmental, non-state and sub-states actors have played an increasing role in foreign policy making.
- In June 1991, the Indian government, facing a balance of payment crisis, launched a series of reforms focused on liberalising economy, reforming the financial system and modernising the tax system.
- At the executive level, the creation in 1998 of a National Security Council in the Prime Minister Office (PMO) modified the mode of foreign-policy making. The channels of power for the management of foreign policy have become more complex than in the past and inter-bureaucratic competition has increased.
- Lastly, socio-economic developments and reforms of the examination have had a direct effect on the composition of the Foreign Service and those who join the IFS are not necessarily people with the skills or aptitude for a career in diplomacy.

These four contextual factors of change have destabilised the institutional culture of the MEA. In order to understand how diplomatic practices and discourses have been adapted to these changes, the following paragraphs will look at the conversion strategies put in place by the institution and their feedback effects.

The Diversification of India's Diplomatic Practices

Similarly to other States, India's diplomatic practices have evolved in the context of globalisation, from the management of political matters to the development of non-political and more 'technical' dimensions of diplomacy, especially economic diplomacy. In the early 1990s, under the impulse of the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, the MEA started to adopt the paradigms of economic liberalisation and development. A number of administrative reforms were initiated from the top and relayed within the MEA by individuals who were close to the Prime Minister. As a consequence, the diplomats got increasingly exposed to economic work. The activism of the MEA on economic diplomacy contrasted with the resistance of the Ministry of Commerce and domestic enterprises, who wanted to implement external liberalisation only once domestic economic reforms were completed (Baru 2009). A small group of diplomats thus managed to impose the MEA as a central coordinating actor in the field of economic diplomacy.

Besides, the readjustment of the MEA also implied the functional and geographic expansion of the bureaucracy, with the creation of new missions abroad and new divisions that reflected the redefinition of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Both this bureaucratic expansion of the MEA and the reorganisation of foreign policy-making at the executive level increased the need for the establishment of cooperation mechanisms between the MEA and

other Ministries. In this context, the diplomats have tried to impose themselves as the brokers of India's foreign policy.

The strategies of reconversion of the institution have led to the reassessment of the modes of legitimation of the diplomat's working practices by the agents themselves. Without doubt, the diplomats' hegemony over classical functions of diplomacy, i.e. negotiation, representation and information gathering, has decreased and two new professional logics have developed: the logic of production (for example the provision of consular services) and the logic of policy coordination (putting external policies into coherent action). As a consequence, a diplomat appears to count less for the competence that he can mobilise and more for the interface that he offers, as also illustrated by the creation of a public diplomacy division in the MEA in 2006. This evolution of practices has also led to the evolution of the IFS officers' representation of their role, as manifested by the higher value that is now given to consular and economic functions. Further research should be conducted to understand to what extent this trend is linked to the evolution of the socio-economic profile of the diplomats, as mentioned above.

The Contraction of India's Diplomatic Discourse

The diversification of the MEA's practices in the context of growing inter-bureaucratic competition has raised a paradox. On the one hand, the diplomats have readjusted their discourse, giving a central place to economic development. On the other hand though, the need to compete with other actors has led the diplomats to stick to the traditional and prestigious discourse of non-alignment, despite the evolutions of the international system after the fall of the Soviet Union. The institutional conversion of the MEA has thus remained partial and focused on innovative instruments rather than on the elaboration of new ideologies and goals, as illustrated by the term 'non-alignment 2.0' (Mehta 2012). The bureaucracy has therefore acted as a normative filter, a 'discourse police' (Neumann 2004, p. 641) that has shaped the new practices to make them compatible with the inherited culture. For example, interviews with Indian diplomats have revealed that they still represent India as a 'developing country'. The relative insularity of the MEA highlighted in the previous part may explain the relative consensus that exists on India's non-alignment. The non-alignment discourse has served as a powerful institutional façade to legitimate the diplomat's work towards the other civil servants, while also serving as a 'tool kit' for the diplomats to determine the appropriate representations and practices of India's foreign policy.

As a consequence, the questions of the external aims, objectives and values of India's foreign policy have been marginalised within the MEA. 'Inward-oriented' (Malone, 2011, p.1), India's diplomacy has focused on the adaptation of its instruments such as the establishment of bilateral, issue-based and 'strategic' partnerships. What follows is a posture of prudence that is consistent with the inherited practices of non-alignment. Nevertheless, combined with the weakness of the political leadership and of planning on foreign policy issues, this diplomatic style tends to reward risk avoidance more than innovation. The case of India's diplomacy in the Gulf region, which will be analysed in the following part, illustrates this argument very well.

IV. A Prudential Diplomatic Style: The Case of India's Diplomacy in the Gulf.

The aim of this part is to understand how the structural trends previously analysed in this paper determine India's diplomatic style. The case of India's diplomacy in the Gulf region[5] is particularly interesting, as it illustrates the roles played by the diplomats in the context of relative bureaucratic autonomy, as well as geographical and functional institutionalisation of India's diplomacy.

Indeed, this region is the geographic area where the Indians have some of the most intensive economic, commercial and energy relations, which took place before the opening of Indian diplomatic missions in the 1970s. In fact, the Gulf accounts for almost 70% of India's oil and gas requirements and hosts approximately 6 million Indian workers. Yet, the politicians did not pay much attention to the Gulf until the turn of the 21st century. This was reflected at the bureaucratic level: postings in the Gulf division of the MEA or in one of the missions in the region were not considered as important in terms of prestige and career, by contrast to postings in Washington, New York or London (Mehta 2010, p.241). Yet, at the same time, due to the lack of political interest in the area, the diplomats who decided to specialise on the Gulf, often called the 'Arabists' by my interviewees, enjoyed some degree of freedom in the implementation of India's foreign policy and played a key role in promoting the rapprochement between their country and West Asia.

Initial Structural Trends of India's Regional Diplomacy

The case of the Gulf provides a good illustration of how the structural weakness of the bureaucracy also contributed to increase the autonomy of the diplomats who represented India abroad. It shows how a small group of diplomats managed to facilitate and encourage the development of cooperative relations between India and the GCC countries.

The oil crisis of the early 1970's and the rise in number of the Indian workforce led to an increase of India's diplomatic presence in the region. The institutionalisation of India's diplomacy was nevertheless an incremental process, characterised by low bureaucratic capacities and weak bureaucratic power of the agents in charge of the region. As a consequence, the young diplomats sent to this region had to rely mostly on the informal networks of the Indian diaspora living there. The diplomats' sociological background, like being originated from Kerala or the Gujarat, the most represented Indian states in the Gulf, thus played an important role in their chance of success. The small number (about ten) of diplomats who decided to invest their career and personal capital into this regional niche had the opportunity to rapidly enhance their influence on India's regional policy making. In particular, the GCC countries are now exploring the idea of reducing their dependence on the United States and are now turning instead towards Asian governments for strategic cooperation (Kamrava 2010) Thanks to their regional experience, the 'Arabists' have played an important role in shaping the recent rapprochement between India and the Gulf countries.

The Weakening of the Role of the MEA in the Region

In accordance with the general evolutions highlighted in the previous part of this paper, the diplomats' work has been increasingly threatened by the role of new actors who interact with the Gulf region, from various domestic bureaucracies (Ministry of Commerce and Industries,

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[5] In this paper, the 'Gulf region' is limited to the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE.

Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and intelligence services) to non-state actors (diaspora, Multinational corporations, businessmen, Muslim pilgrims). The MEA has had difficulties to impose itself as the nodal point for the implementation of India's regional policy. In fact, Indian actors such as the Kerala Chief Minister or the Minister of Energy often bypass the MEA when they visit the region. Interestingly, Indian diplomats manage to maintain a central role in moments of urgency and crises, as lack of time limits opportunities for discussion and lead the decision-makers to privilege simple issues and local competences and relations. For example, in 1991, right after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the diplomats played a key role in the repatriation of 172 000 Indian workers from the two countries (Rana 2009).

A Culture of Risk Avoidance: Effects and Consequences

The monopoly exercised by the MEA on IR expertise is well illustrated by this case study. Indeed, once retired, the 'Arabists' of the MEA have managed to impose themselves as the main experts of the region. They provide knowledge of the reality that corresponds to their institutional culture of risk avoidance. For example, diplomats' writings have focused on the need to protect India's core interests in the region and avoid any aggressive choices regarding regional security (Abhyankar 2013). In addition, the diplomats often oppose India's prudential behaviour to the 'hubris' of the Western countries and especially the United States, a discourse that is in line with India's inherited, anti-imperialist values. They also privilege a procedural approach to the region, stressing the need to resolve common bilateral issues through the establishment of pragmatic partnerships and the promotion of the 'balance of interest,' as opposed to the Western notion of 'balance of power'. This prudential style of diplomacy has favoured India, as it has been able to establish multi-faceted bilateral relations with the Gulf countries, while also engaging with Iran and Israel. In addition, bilateral diplomacy is a flexible instrument that masks political oppositions not only between India and the country that it is dealing with, but also within the Indian government. It fits well with the diplomats' willingness to play the role of arbiters in foreign policy governance.

Nevertheless, factors like regional constraints, low political interest, lack of institutional capacities and problems of coordination between bureaucracies have limited India's regional policy and India's strategic partnerships with the Gulf countries appear relatively weak and disjointed. In addition, at the multilateral level, Western decision-makers have perceived India's regional diplomacy as ambiguous and they have often denounced India's lack of clear objectives and values. This was particularly the case during India's temporary tenure at the UNSC between 2011 and 2013. The Indian diplomats appeared very hesitant on the Libyan and Syrian issues, privileging non-action without seriously debating international principles like the Responsibility to Protect. It would thus be interesting to analyse more deeply the effects of India's prudential diplomatic style on its multilateral status and reputation.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Using the conceptual tools provided by the sociology of institutions, the present paper hopes to contribute to our understanding of the evolution of Foreign Ministries' practices and discourses and their impact on States' external behaviour. Looking at the institutionalisation of the Indian MEA, it shows how initial structural trends, specially the weakness and the isolation of the institution, have determined the hesitant character of India's foreign policy making. In addition, it analyses the complex dimensions of the MEA's conversion in the post

Cold-War era, notably the diversification of diplomatic practices, the evolution of the diplomats' roles and the contraction of India's diplomatic discourse. This contributes to shape a prudential diplomatic style that has ambivalent effects at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.

This paper is work in progress and requires further refinement and research. In particular, the issue of power, which is a constitutive element of the institutionalisation process, should be analysed more deeply. Further research should be conducted on the complex cultural and strategic processes that have led to the current weakening of the MEA in the field of Foreign Policy. For example, both politicians and experts from new think tanks, such as the Takashila Institution and the Gateway House, have raised criticism against the traditional diplomatic discourse of non-alignment. These actors claim for the adoption of a more 'realist', 'responsible' and proactive foreign policy, which would better correspond to the 'goals of major-power status' (Ollapaly and Rajagapolan 2011). It would thus be interesting to look at how the diplomats respond to these criticisms as well as at the divisions that cross over the diplomatic corps. Lastly, thinking of the institution in it relations with the other organisations raises the questions of the circulations and borrowings of knowledge and skills that have taken place between the Indian MEA and the other actors of foreign policy.

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