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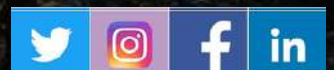
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THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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The Institutional Architecture of Strategic Autonomy



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Abstract

India's engagement with West Asia has historically been managed as a series of episodic transactions like oil purchases, remittance flows, and periodic evacuations rather than as a coherent strategic engagement. Over the last decade, however, the region has emerged as a common strategic arena for Indian policy, characterised by simultaneous diplomatic, military, economic, and intelligence engagement across the Gulf, the Levant, North Africa, and the wider Indian Ocean rim. This paper argues that the transformation is institutional rather than merely rhetorical. It is the product of a coordinated whole-of-government architecture in which the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Defence (and its newly created Department of Military Affairs), the National Security Council Secretariat, and allied intelligence and maritime agencies have been deliberately wired together under the Prime Minister's Office direction. Drawing on the literature on civil-military relations, foreign-policy bureaucracy, and institutional decision-making, and on the empirical record of recent operations and exercises, the paper maps this architecture, demonstrates its functioning in crises and in steady state, and identifies three structural fragilities: civil-military integration gaps, PMO bottlenecking, and capacity constraints in the foreign service that condition its durability. The paper closes with six recommendations directed at the tri-services and strategic policy community.

Keywords

Whole-of-government; strategic autonomy; National Security Council Secretariat; West Asia; defence diplomacy; institutional coordination; Comprehensive National Power.

Genesis: From Episodic to Integrated Engagement

India's interactions with West Asia were structured in a manner that institutional theorists would recognise as a textbook case of compartmentalised foreign-policy administration for most of the period between independence and the second decade of the twenty-first century. Gulf, West Asia and North Africa (WANA), Iran, and Israel were the three or four regional desks that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) managed concurrently. Each had its own political constituents and diplomatic rationale. Contracts for oil supply were handled by the Ministry of Petroleum. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs managed Diaspora welfare (later merged back into MEA). The area was not considered a strategic theatre by the Ministry of Defence, but rather a procurement geography (Israeli weapons after 1992, Russian platforms via West Asian transshipment). Intelligence agencies operated on parallel tracks largely invisible to the diplomatic apparatus.¹ The result was an engagement profile that C. Raja Mohan and Shivshankar Menon have separately described as reactive: capable of competent crisis response, but incapable of sustained strategic shaping.²

Daniel Markey's 2009 diagnosis of India's foreign-policy 'software', the bureaucratic, intellectual and human capital underpinning the country's diplomatic ambitions, captured the structural problem precisely. The Indian Foreign Service was small relative to ambition; area-studies pipelines were thin, and inter-ministerial coordination depended on personal networks rather than institutionalised mechanisms.³ Isabelle Saint-Mézard's earlier analysis of India's Asia policy made an analogous point about the absence of institutional architecture for thinking about extended-neighbourhood theatres in an integrated way.⁴ The Nonalignment 2.0 report, drafted in 2012 by a senior cross-disciplinary group including Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran and Shivshankar Menon, made the institutional critique explicit: India's strategic ambitions, the authors argued, could not be realised without significant reform of the apex coordination machinery linking the MEA, MoD, intelligence community and Prime Minister's Office.⁵

The post-2014 period marks a deliberate attempt to close that gap. Four developments are particularly relevant for West Asia. First, the Prime Minister's Office under Shri Narendra Modi assumed an unprecedentedly active coordinating role, with the PMO functioning as the integrative node above the line ministries, a centralisation that Shyam Saran and Ian Hall have both analysed, with different normative valences, as the defining feature of contemporary Indian statecraft.^{6 7} Second, the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), originally established in 1998-99 but functioning only fitfully thereafter, was systematically expanded under National Security Adviser Ajit Doval: by 2018 it had three Deputy NSAs (with specific portfolios for internal security, external intelligence and diplomatic affairs), a revived Military Adviser post, a Strategic Policy Group chaired by the NSA rather than the Cabinet Secretary, and a Defence Planning Committee also chaired by the NSA.⁸ Third, the appointment of India's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in December 2019, along with the creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) within the MoD, provided at least on paper the institutional bridge between the political-bureaucratic apex and the uniformed services that Anit Mukherjee, in *The Absent Dialogue*, had identified as the missing piece of India's higher defence architecture.⁹ Fourth, the convergence of energy, diaspora, maritime, counter-terror and defence-industrial considerations in the West Asian theatre made the region uniquely demanding of integrated management: no single ministry could plausibly own the file.

It is this convergence that the present paper takes as its analytical starting point. The West Asian theatre, more than any other in India's neighbourhood, has functioned as the testbed for India's evolving whole-of-government architecture, partly because the stakes are so high and so diverse and partly because the operational demands (large evacuations, sustained naval deployments, simultaneous engagement with rival regional powers) leave little room for the ad-hoc, ministry-by-ministry approach of the pre-2014 period.

The Architecture Mapped

Four institutional layers constitute the present architecture: the MEA layer, the MoD and services layer, the NSCS-and-apex layer, and a set of allied agencies that operate horizontally across the others.

- **The MEA Layer**

On the diplomatic side, the MEA maintains two principal territorial divisions covering West Asia: The Gulf Division (covering the six GCC states and Iran-Iraq-Yemen) and the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) Division (covering the Levant, Egypt and the Maghreb, with Israel-Palestine on a de-hyphenated bilateral basis). The MEA's Development Partnership Administration (DPA-I, II and III) manages technical and project assistance, including health, infrastructure, and capacity-building lines that have become an increasingly visible component of India's engagement with smaller Gulf and East African states. Consular operations are run through embassies in eight West Asian capitals serving the largest Indian-citizen overseas community anywhere in the world.^{10 11} The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the public-diplomacy machinery provide the soft-power infrastructure: yoga days at the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, ICCR chairs in Tel Aviv and Tehran, and the BAPS Hindu Mandir initiative in Abu Dhabi, among others. As Markey noted more than a decade and a half ago, however, the MEA's headquarters cadre remains structurally small relative to ambition, a constraint that has been only partially mitigated by lateral recruitment and the expansion of policy planning capacity.¹²

- **The Ministry of Defence and the Services Layer**

On the defence side, the institutional landscape has been substantially re-engineered since 2019. The Department of Military Affairs (DMA), headed by the Chief of Defence Staff as its ex-officio secretary, brings tri-service issues, joint planning, training, doctrine, capability development and procurement of below-capital items into a single departmental locus.¹³ The Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS), under the CDS, hosts the Defence Intelligence Agency, oversees the Defence Cyber Agency, Defence Space Agency and Armed Forces Special Operations Division (the three tri-service agencies approved in 2018), and maintains the Defence Attaché (DA) network across the region with full-time DAs in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Tehran, Muscat, Doha, Kuwait City, Baghdad and Manama, in addition to liaison arrangements with several other regional capitals.¹⁴ The 2017 Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces,

issued by the IDS, provides the formal doctrinal cover for jointness in operations and serves as the public articulation of the tri-service vision that the DMA is meant to operationalise.¹⁵ The Department of Defence Production (DDP), separately, runs the Defence Exports Promotion mechanism that has driven the post-2019 push to convert West Asia into a market for Indian-manufactured platforms, from BrahMos discussions with several Gulf states to small-arms, ammunition, radar and naval systems exports.

- **The NSCS Layer and Apex Coordination**

The pivotal institutional change of the last decade lies in the National Security Council Secretariat. The NSCS was given legal-constitutional status through an amendment to the Government's Allocation of Business Rules in August 2019, formally designating it as the secretariat for the Prime Minister-led National Security Council and the NSA as 'Principal Adviser on national security matters to the Prime Minister.'¹⁶ By 2024, the NSCS housed an Additional NSA (a position created for the first time in 2024 with the elevation of Rajinder Khanna), three Deputy NSAs with specific portfolios (internal security and J&K, strategic and maritime affairs; technology and intelligence), a Military Adviser, a National Maritime Security Coordinator, and verticals covering policy and strategy, planning and capability development, defence diplomacy, defence manufacturing, cyber security and space. The Strategic Policy Group, revived under NSA chairmanship in 2018, brings together the Cabinet Secretary, the three service chiefs, the CDS, the Defence Secretary, the Home Secretary, and the Foreign Secretary in a structured deliberative forum. The Joint Intelligence Committee, historically separate from the NSCS but functionally linked through the Deputy NSA for intelligence, continues to provide consolidated intelligence assessments.¹⁷ Above the NSCS sits the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising the Ministers of Defence, External Affairs, Home and Finance, which functions as the final political-decision body on national-security questions. The PMO, with the Principal Secretary as its administrative head, provides the integrative coordination across all of this.¹⁸

- **Allied Institutions and Horizontal Linkages**

Several allied institutions complete the picture. The Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) operate on the external-intelligence side under the Cabinet Secretariat but reports operationally through the Additional NSA. The National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), set up in 2004, provides technical intelligence and is now linked operationally to the Defence Cyber Agency on cyber matters. Most consequentially for the West Asian theatre, the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), inaugurated in Gurugram in December 2018 and co-located with the Information Management and Analysis Centre, has emerged as a maritime-domain-awareness hub with international liaison officers from fifteen partner nations, including several whose maritime interests directly intersect with the Gulf, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the wider Arabian Sea.¹⁹ The IFC-IOR is institutionally part of the Indian Navy but functions as a multi-national information-sharing platform that, in practice, gives India a continuous, near-real-time picture of merchant traffic, illegal fishing, piracy and irregular maritime activity across the Indian Ocean Rim, including the approaches to all three West Asian maritime chokepoints. Abhijit Singh has documented how the centre, originally conceived as a soft-power platform for the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium agenda, has progressively been weaponised in the analytical sense, its outputs feeding directly into Indian Navy operational tempo and into the NSCS's maritime threat picture.²⁰ What is significant, institutionally, is that the IFC-IOR does not sit neatly within any of the line ministries: it is a Navy-hosted entity with MEA and NSCS users, a textbook horizontal node in the architecture this paper is mapping.

Coordination in Action: Empirical Evidence

The architecture described above is not merely declarative. Four classes of recent activity humanitarian evacuations, sustained naval security operations, structured defence diplomacy, and minilateral economic-strategic groupings demonstrate that the wiring is live.

- **Operation Kaveri: Sudan, April- May 2023**

The evacuation of Indian nationals from Sudan in April 2023 is the cleanest recent illustration of whole-of-government coordination. When conflict erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces on 15 April 2023, the MEA's Indian Embassy in Khartoum issued safety advisories within hours and stood up a 24-hour control room in Delhi. The Prime Minister chaired a high-level review on 21 April. When Operation Kaveri was officially declared on April 24, the Indian Air Force had already stationed two C-130J Super Hercules and members of the Garud Commando in Jeddah; the Indian Navy's INS Sumedha had arrived in Port Sudan, followed a few days later by INS Teg; and Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan was on-station in Jeddah overseeing the transit facility. Throughout the operation, between 3,800 and 4,100 Indians and 136 foreigners were evacuated using a combination of naval sealift to Jeddah and IAF airlift to India, with ongoing coordination between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, the United Nations, and the United States^{21 22 23}. The seamless integration of MEA's diplomatic and consular apparatus, MoD's air and naval lift, NSCS's apex-level coordination, and a third-country transit facility negotiated through MEA bilateral channels is what gives Operation Kaveri its textbook character rather than its size (the 1990 Kuwait airlift was an order of magnitude larger). In contrast to the 1990 evacuation, which was carried out under circumstances of extreme institutional innovation, as documented in K. P. Fabian's biography, Operation Kaveri was carried out with comparatively little apparent conflict; in other words, the architecture functioned.

- **Operation Ajay: Israel, October 2023**

The repatriation of Indian nationals from Israel following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 followed an analogous template at compressed tempo. Within four days, the MEA had set up a 24-hour control room, the Embassy in Tel Aviv had activated a registration system, and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had announced Operation Ajay on 11 October. The first chartered evacuation flight departed Ben Gurion Airport on the night of 12-13 October, with five further flights over the following ten days bringing back approximately 1,300

Indian nationals^{24 25}. Although the bulk of the operation was conducted on chartered civilian aircraft rather than IAF lift, the C-17 Globemaster, IL-76 and C-130J fleets were kept on standby, an arrangement that required real-time MEA-MoD-civil aviation-NSCS synchronisation. The choice not to escalate to military airlift, made by the CCS based on NSCS assessment, was itself a coordination output. The fact that India ran simultaneous evacuation operations from a war zone in Israel while maintaining substantive diplomatic engagement with Iran (a Chabahar port agreement was signed only seven months later) is the institutional embodiment of de-hyphenation in practice.

- **Operation Sankalp and the Continuous Maritime Footprint**

If Operations Kaveri and Ajay illustrate crisis coordination, Operation Sankalp illustrates steady-state institutional functioning. Launched in June 2019 to escort Indian-flagged tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman following attacks on commercial shipping, Sankalp has been continuously sustained ever since through tanker incidents, the Gaza war, the Houthi maritime campaign, and the three rounds of direct Israel-Iran confrontation in 2024 and 2025²⁶. Sustaining a deployment of this scale at peak more than thirty warships on rotation across the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, requires an institutional substrate that links the Navy's Western Naval Command (Mumbai), the IDS's intelligence and operational support, the NSCS's maritime security coordinator, the MEA's diplomatic channels in Tehran, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Cairo, and the Petroleum Ministry's tanker-routing information. Arjun Subramaniam's account of India's operational continuity in the post-1972 period frames Sankalp as exemplifying a broader pattern: the institutional capacity for sustained out-of-area maritime presence accumulates only over decades and is the necessary substrate on which the diplomatic posture of 'net security provider' rests.²⁷

- **Steady-State Defence Diplomacy**

Defence diplomacy, bilateral exercises, training exchanges, port visits, and defence-industrial engagement provide the continuous low-tempo coordination that crisis-mode operations rely on. The inaugural India-UAE Desert Cyclone exercise (Rajasthan, January 2024) and its second iteration in Abu Dhabi

(December 2025) focused on urban operations and counter-terrorism, conducted by the Army with parallel naval (Zayed Talwar / Gulf Waves) and air (Desert Flag, Tarang Shakti) engagements.²⁸ India-Saudi Arabia naval cooperation runs through Al Mohed Al Hindi, now in its third iteration in 2024.²⁹ The India-Oman exercises Naseem Al Bahr (Navy), Al Najah (Army) and Eastern Bridge (Air Force) provide the longest-running and most institutionally mature defence-diplomacy track, supported by India's logistics access at Duqm.³⁰ Each of these exercises is, on the surface, a tri-service or single-service activity coordinated by the respective Service Headquarters. Institutionally, however, they are scoped, mandated and politically calibrated through the MEA's bilateral strategic dialogue track, with NSCS sign-off where they touch sensitive operational profiles. The defence-diplomacy calendar, in other words, is one of the clearest illustrations of the architecture functioning in steady state.

- **I2U2 and the Minilateral Layer**

Finally, the post-2022 minilateral architecture, particularly the I2U2 grouping (India-Israel-UAE-United States), demonstrates the coordination challenge at a higher level of complexity. I2U2 is principally an economic-track minilateral focused on food security, energy, technology and infrastructure, formally led on the Indian side by the MEA. But its strategic frame of what kinds of Indian partnerships with Israel, the UAE and the United States are politically and operationally tenable is set by the NSCS, and the security implications (especially around dual-use technologies and cyber cooperation) are tracked by the MoD and the Defence Cyber Agency. The fact that I2U2 survived, at least nominally, the post-October 2023 regional crisis even as IMEC, a parallel grouping with overlapping but distinct membership, was effectively suspended speaks to the architecture's resilience in keeping multiple, partially incompatible engagement tracks alive simultaneously. As Garima Mohan and Kristi Govella have argued in the related Quad context, minilaterals function as coordination vehicles whose value lies less in their declared outputs than in the institutional muscle memory they generate across participating bureaucracies.³¹

Taken together, these four classes of activity crisis evacuations, sustained maritime presence, structured defence diplomacy and minilateral coordination constitute the empirical case for the institutional argument advanced in this paper. They are not merely the outputs of skilled individuals or favourable circumstances; they are the outputs of an architecture that has been deliberately constructed and that functions, even if unevenly, across multiple ministries and operational domains. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow's framing of foreign-policy outputs as the result of organisational behaviour and bureaucratic politics, rather than the unitary-rational decisions of a single decision-maker, applies with particular force here.³² What the Indian state produces in West Asia is the result of an institutional system that has, on the evidence of the last five years, learned to coordinate.

Critical Assessment: Architecture or Aspiration?

The architecture is real. It is also uneven, fragile and partially undocumented. Three structural fragilities deserve honest acknowledgement, both because the analytical record requires it and because the recommendations that follow are intelligible only against this critique. Christopher Hill's framing of foreign policy as a process in which institutional capacity routinely lags behind political ambition provides the comparative reference point: India's experience is neither uniquely problematic nor obviously exceptional, but the gaps are real.³³

- **Civil-Military Integration Gaps**

Anit Mukherjee's central thesis in *The Absent Dialogue* and his earlier "Fighting Separately" article remain analytically indispensable: civil-military relations in India are characterised by a structural absence of substantive dialogue between politicians, civil servants and the uniformed military on the questions of operational doctrine, joint planning and force structure that constitute the substance of higher defence management.³⁴ Steven Wilkinson's complementary historical account of why this pattern has persisted, despite the obvious functional costs, traces it to deliberate post-Partition political choices about civilian supremacy that were never accompanied by the parallel investment in civilian defence expertise that would have made coordination substantive rather than nominal.³⁵ Walter Ladwig's analysis of Indian military

modernisation makes the corresponding operational point: capability development has been chronically constrained by inter-service rivalry and by a procurement system in which the political-bureaucratic-military triangle generates delay rather than decision.³⁶ The creation of the CDS post in 2019 was the most consequential reform attempt to address these problems, but the fourteen-month vacancy after General Bipin Rawat's death in December 2021 during which the institution was effectively in suspension until General Anil Chauhan's appointment in September 2022 exposed the personality-dependence of the system. As Laxman Behera's IDSA assessments have argued, the CDS's mandate remains caught between two structures of authority within the MoD: the Department of Defence, headed by the Defence Secretary and the Department of Military Affairs, headed by the CDS, with overlapping responsibilities for capital acquisition, manpower and 'defence of India' that have not been unambiguously resolved.³⁷

- **PMO Centralisation and Single-Point-of-Failure Risk**

The second fragility lies in the very centralisation that has made the post-2014 architecture functionally effective. The PMO's integrative coordinating role, executed in practice through a small core of officials with cabinet rank and the Prime Minister's direct confidence, accelerates decisions and concentrates institutional memory in a handful of individuals. Ian Hall has analysed this as the 'personalisation' of Indian foreign policy under Modi: a strategic-cultural shift away from the consensus-based, MEA-led model of the pre-2014 period and toward a model in which Prime Ministerial conviction substitutes for inter-ministerial deliberation.³⁸ The functional benefits are obvious: speed, decisiveness, and the ability to break through bureaucratic inertia on questions where the MEA and MoD have historically pulled in different directions. The costs are equally obvious: single-point-of-failure risk if the integrative individual is unavailable or replaced, and the tendency of institutional muscle memory in line ministries that increasingly come to rely on PMO direction. Cohen and Dasgupta's older Arming Without Aiming framing of India's national-security decision-making as 'presidentialised' in its outputs but 'parliamentary' in its underlying institutional logic captures a tension that the post-2014 architecture has accentuated rather than resolved.³⁹

- **MEA Capacity and the Foreign-Service Bottleneck**

The third fragility is the most quantifiable. The Indian Foreign Service remains small, with approximately 1,000 IFS officers in total, with the headquarters cadre dealing with West Asia numbering in the low double-digits across the Gulf, WANA and related divisions. By comparison with the U.S. State Department's roughly 14,000 foreign-service officers, the United Kingdom's diplomatic service of roughly 4,500, or even Brazil's roughly 1,500, the capacity gap is structural rather than incidental.⁴⁰ What this means for the West Asian architecture is concrete: even when coordination meetings produce decisions, the implementation cadre is thin enough that depth of follow-through is often constrained. The NSCS's expansion since 2018 has partly addressed the strategic-policy end of this constraint, but the MEA's structural capacity question remains the binding bottleneck on the long-tail engagement work area expertise, sustained track-two diplomacy, and defence-industrial commercial diplomacy that converts diplomatic relationships into strategic outcomes.

- **The Missing National Security Strategy**

Underlying all three of these fragilities is the absence of a published National Security Strategy (NSS). Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Australia and most other comparable democracies, India has not promulgated a publicly articulated NSS. A draft document is reportedly ready. Tara Kartha's account of the post-2018 NSCS reform process notes that a draft was authored by a member of the National Security Advisory Board, but it has not been issued. The institutional consequence is that the coordination architecture this paper has mapped operates based on tacit consensus rather than documented mandate. As the Nonalignment 2.0 group argued and as Manoj Joshi has more recently reiterated, the absence of a published NSS makes the architecture more dependent on the current political leadership's commitment than is structurally desirable and makes it harder for line ministries to plan against a stable set of priorities.⁴¹ Paul Kapur's broader argument about strategic culture and South Asian subcontinental dynamics is relevant here: the absence of documented strategy is itself an institutional choice, with strategic consequences that compound over time.⁴²

These critiques do not invalidate the architecture. They specify its load-bearing conditions. Harsh Pant's edited volumes on India's evolving foreign policy machinery make the broader point that what India has built since 2014 is, by any reasonable comparative standard, a substantially more capable national-security state than what existed before, but capability is not the same as durability, and structural fragility is consistent with strong recent performance.⁴³

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are pitched at the tri-service and strategic-policy audience for which this issue brief is principally intended. They are deliberately concrete, sequenced from highest-leverage to most diffuse.

First, release a National Security Strategy (NSS) that includes a segment specifically for West Asia. The specific point here is that the West Asian theatre, more than any other, would benefit from a written mandate. The political and bureaucratic rationale for an NSS has been extensively discussed elsewhere. An NSS would also regulate the PMO's integrative role within a visible framework, and the line ministries could coordinate much more successfully around recorded priorities than around inferred ones. Behera's higher-defence-reform stocktake is accurate; an NSS would also provide the CDS and DMA with a strategic benchmark for planning capability growth.⁴⁴

Establish a West Asia Strategic Cell within the NSCS as the second step. Ad hoc cross-ministry task forces that are formed in response to crises are the foundation of the current approach. In order to transform episodic cooperation into ongoing institutional output, a permanent multi-agency cell comprising officials from MEA's Gulf and WANA divisions, the DMA, IDS, Navy's Western Naval Command, R&AW, IB, and NTRO would be formed. The approach is already in place in the NSCS's cyber, space, and marine functional verticals; a regional vertical for West Asia makes sense. The model for what such a cell should strive for is provided by Mukherjee's analysis of the substantive (rather than nominal) integration necessary for civil-military collaboration.⁴⁵

Third, establish an IDS Joint West Asia Theatre Coordination structure. A full theatre command, which is still controversial and might be premature given the larger theaterisation discussion, is not the same as this. It is an IDS coordination cell that connects MEA's Gulf and WANA desks to Southern Air Command (air lift and reach),

Western Naval Command (maritime), and the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (special operations and evacuation capability). The edited assessment of India's higher defence organisation by Pushan Das and Harsh Pant presents a more comprehensive argument for inter-services coordination mechanisms that fall short of full theaterisation.⁴⁶

Fourth, bolster West Asia's Defence Attaché network. The two to three-year DA terms that are now in place are insufficient for the accumulation of area expertise. The institutional knowledge base would be significantly expanded by longer tenures (four to five years), organised area-studies training before posting, and a small pre-deployment course at the National Defence College or the Indian Defence University (when founded). The DA cadre is one of the system's underutilised levers, according to Joshi's larger thesis on national security architecture reform.⁴⁷

Fifth, instead of viewing the diaspora exclusively as a consular duty, integrate it as an institutional asset. MEA's consular apparatus maps the approximately 8.9 million Indian nationals in the GCC in granular form; NSCS contingency planning does not consistently include the resulting data. Using the e-Migrate system and the MEA's consular databases, a dedicated Diaspora Contingency Mapping function within the NSCS would make crisis-response architecture, like the one that resulted in Operations Kaveri and Ajay, faster, more detailed, and less personality-dependent. The larger doctrinal framework is suggested by Pravin Sawhney's articles on theatre-command thinking for the Indian Ocean and Abhijit Singh's research on soft power and marine diaspora connections.⁴⁸

Sixth, increase the pipelines for area studies. This paper's mapping of the institutional architecture calls for a cadre of intelligence, military, and diplomatic officials with in-depth knowledge of West Asia. There is a thin supply side. The institutional pipeline would be established by sponsored chairs on West Asian security at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), the National Defence College, the United Service Institution, and important university departments (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Mumbai University, Calcutta University). The equivalent on the area-studies side is required, as Carnegie India and ORF have shown the feasibility of policy-research career tracks in this field. One model

is provided by Constantino Xavier's research on India's diaspora and area-engagement organisations.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This paper's argument has been limited to institutions. India's purposeful architecture, which has produced synchronised output across crises and steady-state interaction over the past five years, lays the foundation for its shift from episodic to integrated engagement with West Asia. India's wider West Asia strategy is based on the institutional framework of the MEA's regional divisions, the MoD's redesigned higher-defence structure under the CDS and DMA, the NSCS's expanded coordinating role under the NSA, and the apex integration offered by the CCS and the PMO.

Allied institutions like R&AW, NTRO, the Defence Cyber Agency, and the IFC-IOR extend the architecture horizontally across functional domains in ways that earlier institutional designs did not enable. Where the pre-2014 architecture was absent in the sense that its inputs to operational outputs were limited and personality-dependent, the present architecture is functioning, even if its functioning is uneven.

The fragilities are real. The civil-military integration gaps that Mukherjee, Wilkinson and Ladwig have separately analysed have been partially addressed by the CDS and DMA reforms, but not resolved. The PMO's integrative role has produced speed at the cost of personalisation, and the absence of a published National Security Strategy makes the architecture more contingent on incumbent political leadership than is structurally desirable. The MEA's structural capacity questions whether the foreign-service bottleneck remains binding. None of these fragilities means the architecture is not working. They mean that the architecture's working is reversible and that its current performance level cannot be assumed without continued institutional investment.

This paper has argued that the institutional architecture is the foundation on which the book's broader 'Atmanirbhar Guardrail' doctrine, the industrial-diplomatic synthesis explored in subsequent papers, must operate. Without coordinated whole-of-government machinery, indigenous defence-industrial capacity cannot be converted into diplomatic agency; without diplomatic agency, indigenous capacity cannot find the markets and partnerships that sustain its growth. The transition from absent (pre-2014) through functioning (2019-present) toward durable (the work still to be done) is the

institutional through-line that frames everything that follows. As Ian Hall has argued in his book-length treatment of the Modi-era foreign-policy machinery, what has been built is real; what remains to be built is at least as significant.⁵⁰

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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