

## Book Review

T.V. Paul. 2024. *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0197669990; pp. 280.

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In 2023, India became the world's most populous country, with 1.4 billion people, and has made rapid economic and technological growth since the 1990s. It has the second-largest standing armed forces with 1.46 million personnel, possesses a nuclear arsenal, and plays a key role in confronting China's great power aspirations. Yet despite India's accomplishments, it is not a major power, its status is not institutionalized, lacking a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

In *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*, T.V. Paul examines the historical efforts by India's leaders to obtain higher status in the international system and the constraints and opportunities they have experienced in that pursuit. Paul contends that Sino-Indian differences are part of a larger disagreements over international status in the Indo-Pacific region.

The book is structured with an introduction, followed by chapters on India's pursuit for international status, hard power, soft power, great powers,

the neighbors, state capacity, and the future. Since India's independence in 1947, its leaders from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi have sought higher status for India at the global stage, making great inroads, yet this quest is incomplete and has been impaired by several international, domestic, and societal constraints.

At the international-level, India missed out on two occasions: in 1945 when India was not included in the permanent five members of the UNSC, and in 1968 when the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty came into force with India as a non-nuclear state because it had yet to conduct a nuclear test. Domestic challenges have inhibited the attainment of higher international status which includes creating an inclusive, developmental state, especially in wealth distribution and the provision of public services such as universal education and healthcare, and infrastructure development. The book identifies two powerful cultural and historical factors that coalesce in India: the hierarchical caste ideas and the inherited British-era colonial class-based education system,

which both reinforce inequality especially in the country's heavily populated Northern states.

Paul identifies ten key elements of hard and soft power that are essential for state to claim major power status and make up its overall national power capabilities. Meeting or exceeding these criteria would help a state move on from regional influence into a potentially higher status with global influence. A state's hard power resources consist of four elements: military, economic, technological/knowledge, and demographic. Soft power includes six elements: normative position, leadership role in international institutions, culture, state capacity, strategy and diplomacy, and effective national leadership.

The book analyzes India's hard power achievements and the challenges it has faced. India has the world's third largest defense budget, and its nuclear forces include a triad and can target China and Pakistan. India lacks the ability to project its military globally, which limits its status as a military power. India's military has been constrained by countering China and Pakistan, internal security threats, weak civil-military relations, challenges with weapons procurement and military service jointness. Paul notes a key game changer for India is to build a globally significant naval strength, which could challenge China's naval expansion in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

India's economic reforms, in 1991, made it one of the world's fastest-growing major economies. India's rapid economic growth occurred

through international trade, facilitated by infrastructure development, smart regulatory prices, foreign direct investment, and overall global economic prosperity. India's space technology, such as landing a craft on the moon, information technology, pharmaceuticals, and new technologies show progress in India's hard power markers. Demographically, India should benefit from having the world's largest population of the age group of 20-55. However, India has struggled with making the most of its population, particularly in the states that are falling behind in economic growth, skills development, and inclusive human development.

Hard-power markers are essential for status enhancement, accommodation by established powers, and recognition by non-great-power states. However, the primary question is whether these markers of hard power are of any consequence to other leading international actors. In sum, India's material assets are a work in progress, and it remains an international second-tier power.

Since the 1990s, India's soft-power attributes have become more well-known due to the state's growing economy and the globalization of information. This includes India's civilization and culture such as major religions originating in India, yoga, art, music, cuisine, literature, and film. India's political system consists of four institutional structures: democracy, secularism, federalism, and the three-language formula. The Hindutva (Hindu-ness agenda) project, although highly ambitious on

status acquisition for India on its own religious/nationalist terms, is likely a net negative for India's status aspirations as it is exclusive, state status is not solely based on civilization or religion, and neighboring states that have gone the religious route have become illiberal. The spread of illiberal values in India is likely to negatively affect its soft power and the durability and sustainability of its international status ranking.

Paul argues that soft-power resources alone will not bring influence or status but rather it is the confluence of hard- and soft-power resources that offers a country an enduring leadership role and status in the global arena. Further, states should not rely on soft-power alone, such as in 1962 when India's reliance on soft-power status was tarnished when it suffered a humiliating military defeat by China.

A new power requires acceptance from its peers before it can gain status. India's acceptance by almost all leading powers as a candidate great power and the recognition of such a role through their statements, increased diplomatic engagements, and visits by leaders, as well as accordance of membership in most international organizations. The rise of China initially challenged India's status aspirations, but China's increasing hostilities with the West resulted in India's receiving enhanced status from the U.S. and other powers, such as Japan. India's hard power and soft power strengths will be crucial in gaining peer acceptance and may lead to increased Chinese challenges on the border and in the Indian Ocean. The key dilemma

for India is how to become swing state an important ally to the West, while balancing its identity as leader of the developing world and its autonomy as a post-colonial, independent country with its own destiny to achieve.

Historically, a state needed to become status-dominant in its immediate region before it gained global power status. While India outmatches other South Asian states in status and material capabilities, its influence and activities have not always been welcomed by its neighbors, not just Pakistan. India has recognized that it must move beyond South Asia into other regions to achieve a higher status through peaceful strategies. Relative to increasing Chinese influence in South Asia, India's influence in the larger Indo-Pacific region, to include Southeast Asia, is likely to grow.

India's status quest is hampered by the continued prevalence of a weak state with a highly uneven socio-economic development of the population. Despite achieving many status markers, there are three critical factors in India's developmental challenge. The first is weak state capacity; the second is the often-ineffective policies of inclusive economic growth; and the third is the increasing intolerance of the polity, especially toward minority Muslims and lower castes.

How India responds to these constraints to achieving its quest for higher status is tentative. Paul assesses that Indian will most likely remain a "truncated-major power," or a "partial power" in the short and medium terms. For India to realize its status goals, it

may need to do more in the economic arena and must also pursue deft diplomatic and military strategies. Status attainment is not a linear process, where gains and losses in status occur. Further, legitimacy and peer group recognition are crucial for a rising power to obtain major power status.

It is a puzzle as to how a state obtains higher international status, recognition by others, and enters the major power club in the absence of a major war, which was the most prominent mechanism through which a state gained or lost status. A peaceful Indian ascent to major power would challenge the dominant theoretical and empirical narrative that great power is achieved only through war.

Since the book's composition, India continues to face challenges with status enhancement. India's soft power credentials took a hit with India al-

legedly conducting assassinations and plotting against Sikh activists in Canada and the United States which strained relations with those respective countries.<sup>1</sup> U.S.-India relations started off on high note under the Trump administration in 2025 with Modi's visit to the White House, but spats over trade, India's reliance on Russian oil, and disagreements on the U.S. role in mediating a cease-fire between Indian and Pakistan have disrupted expected closer ties between India and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's book is an important analysis of India's unfinished quest for status enhancement to become a major international player. India has made great strides in both hard and soft powers since achieving its independence, but it must address domestic constraints while navigating international challenges if it wants to achieve major power status and acknowledgement by its peers.

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## Notes and References

- 1 Das, Anupreeta. 2024. "Facing Murder Plot Accusations, India Aids U.S. but Is Stern with Canada." *The New York Times*, October 18.
- 2 Jacob, Happymon. 2025. "The Shocking Rift Between India and the United States: Can Progress in the Partnership Survive Trump?" *Foreign Affairs*, August 14.