

Indian Great Power Aspirations: An Analysis

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Abstract

For the last 60 years, the aspiration to achieve great power status has been an obsession of the Indian political mindset. India justifies this on the basis of an ancient civilization, having the second largest population and being the largest democracy of the world. The Indian security model also reflects this aspiration which is based on the principle of dominance and of enlarging its perimeter of security far beyond its geographical borders. India desires for a hegemonic role in South Asia to attain a great power status but it has daunting challenges both at home and abroad in its way. The study would try to answer and evaluate the afore-mentioned thesis.

Key Words: India, South Asia, Regional Hegemony, Great Power.

Introduction

Though the aspiration has been there since its inception, India for some years now has been acting to realize its aim of becoming a pre-eminent nation not only in the region but also in the world. India took off to achieve this target in the early 1990s when faced with a massive economic crisis it decided to initiate economic reforms and embrace the model of a liberal market economy. Since its economic liberalization, which began in 1991, India has been able to maintain a healthy growth rate. The size of the Indian economy more than doubled during 1991 to 2000. Economic estimates project India to become the sixth largest economy of the world by 2017.¹

It is not only in the economic sphere that India has been making big advances, militarily too, India has made tremendous strides in the past few

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¹ "World's Largest Economies," *CNN*, http://money.cnn.com/news/economy/world_economies_gdp/ (accessed July 31, 2013).

decades. The Indian armed forces are now more than a million-man strong, possessing nuclear weapons and effective delivery systems. India is in the process of acquiring the capabilities to “Rise through the International Order” to become a great power.² It is not just the thinking of the foreign policy and security community; it is also the common belief of many ordinary Indians.³

States which want to attain great power status first strive for acquiring regional hegemony. The United States of America (US) before participating in world affairs as a great power first acquired the status of a regional hegemon back in the nineteenth century.⁴ Since the days of Napoleonic France all rising great powers, for example Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War had tried to establish regional hegemony first.

Considering India’s immediate neighbourhood in South Asia, “it is evident that India’s foreign/security policy has supported the main tenets of offensive realism” with regard to maximizing its power, curtailing Pakistan and trying to establish regional hegemony.⁵ On the contrary, with regard to China, India has not so much been forthcoming a la John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism — explicit containment structures and military alliance formation — instead, India has been focusing on building up its own strength and softer balancing through implicit understandings and arrangements with other states like the US and Japan, which are also anxious about China’s rise.⁶

Explaining India’s Rise and Aspirations

Economic growth and vitality are universally viewed as classic power characteristics of a state. International Relations (IR) realist scholars from Hans Morgenthau to John Mearsheimer award principal position to economic factors in determining the total power of states, for the reason that

² Stephen P Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 31.

³ K. Bajpai, “Introduction,” in K. Bajpai and S. Mallavarapu, ed., *International Relations in India: Theorizing the Region and Nation* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 2.

⁴ John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 238-252.

⁵ M. Pardesi, “Deducing India’s Grand Strategy of Regional Hegemony from Historical and Regional Perspectives,” Working Paper, *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies*, Singapore, no. 76 (2005): 50.

⁶ David Scott, ed., *Handbook of India’s International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011), xxiii.

a vigorous and viable economy can offer more capital to the defence sector and turn healthy Gross Domestic Product (GDP) into enhanced military might. India's economic growth underpins its foreign policy:

Over the past decade and more, the debate in this country on the nature of our interaction with the world, with our wider Asian neighbourhood and with Major Powers, has also been shaped by the sweeping changes in our economic policy. The initiatives we took in the early 1990s towards economic liberalization have not only altered the nature of our interaction with the world, but have also shaped global perceptions of India... It is also interesting to note that the response of other countries to our national security concerns is being shaped by perceptions of business and economic opportunities. Countries that imposed sanctions on India when we declared ourselves a nuclear weapons power are building bridges with us, to utilize opportunities for mutual economic benefit... Our foreign policy is of course shaped by our civilizational values... it is shaped by our yearning to recover our lost space in the global economy and our economic status in the comity of Nations.⁷

Realist assumptions, analyses, and prescriptions have been predominant in India that explain India's quest for maximizing its national power with its stress on state-centred sovereignty.⁸ The unbending and jealous attachment of states to their sovereignty and territorial integrity in a competitive international system, increases the propensity towards power balancing, the centrality of military strength, and the dependence on force to control international relations.⁹ India's border war with People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1962 and India's consequent defeat still irks the Indian strategists. Since that defeat India has woken up to the reality of "gunpowder politics" and civilian governments since then have stressed the continuous and necessary renovation and upgrading of the military.

⁷ M. Singh, "Speech by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh," *India Today Conclave* (New Delhi), February 25, 2005, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=73> (accessed March 22, 2013).

⁸ K. Bajpai, "Introduction," in K. Bajpai and S. Mallavarapu, ed., *International Relations in India: Theorizing the Region and Nation* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 2.

⁹ David Scott, *Handbook of India's International Relations*, xxiii.

Economic Dimensions of a Rising India

India began to be recognized as a powerful state in the global affairs only after it achieved an elevating economic growth path of over eight per cent per annum since 2003, touching 10.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2006.¹⁰ To be taken as seriously as China, India had to hoist and then uphold GDP growth at such a rapid pace. India was able to achieve this high growth rate through amalgamation of two phases of liberalization of state controls on the economy, firstly by inflow of immense quantity of foreign investment and secondly by introduction of Indian products in the international markets. A rush forward in the industrial sector and sustained increase in the service sectors have underpinned the post-2003 boom.¹¹ The GDP growth rate slowed due to the global financial crisis in 2008-09, but improved during 2009-10 to reach 7.4 per cent for the whole year. The GDP rate accelerated still further to 8.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2010.¹²

According to media reports, India was training a million engineering graduates a year, compared to 100,000 each in the US and Europe. India was said to rest third in technical and scientific competence — following the US and Japan but well in advance of China. As the Indian economy trebled in size between 1991 and 2001, the IT sector in India earned almost US\$ 50bn a year generally in export revenues. This economic boom still continues today. Average income of an ordinary Indian is expected to double every ten years. Mobile phone users have jumped from three million in 2000 to 100 million in 2005 and 929 million in 2012. The number of television channels has risen from one in 1991 to 150 in 2007 and more than 500 today. In 2006, 23 Indians appeared on the Forbes list of the world's billionaires; in 2013, the figure had more than doubled to 55.¹³

India's Military Modernization

In the military sphere India remained an elephant bound to time when its economy grew at a snail's pace before 1991. India's purchasing power and domestic production infrastructure remained limited due to pocketbook

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ C. Chandrasekhar and J. Ghosh, "What Explains the High GDP Growth?," *Business Line*, September 11, 2007.

¹² David Scott, *Handbook of India's International Relations*.

¹³ William Dalrymple, "What Happened to India's Economic Miracle?," *New Statesman*, July 5, 2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/business/2013/07/what-happened-india%E2%80%99s-economic-miracle> (accessed July 21, 2013).

shortages. The extraordinary increase in the Indian GDP rate since 2003, however, has eased the pecuniary restrictions somewhat and provided justification for greater investment in building the military into a potent 21st century force befitting India's self-image as a future superpower.¹⁴ For modernization of its 1.3 million strong armed forces India hiked its defence outlay to Rs. 1,93,408 crore (around US\$ 39 billion) in 2012-13, to cater for some major fighter aircraft, helicopter and howitzer deals to be inked in the coming year.¹⁵

Previously in 2004 India tripled its naval spending to 18 per cent of the defence budget, reflecting the new emphasis on quickly deploying an ocean-going fleet. This increase in budgetary allocation reportedly allowed India to spend US\$ 1 billion on a top-secret project to build a nuclear powered submarine euphemistically called the Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV) and US\$ 2.5 billion to buy the 44,500 ton ex-Soviet carrier Admiral Gorshkov and four Tu-22M long-range naval bombers/strike aircraft from Russia.¹⁶ In addition to plans for leasing (with the ultimate objective of buying) two Type 971 Akula-class nuclear powered submarines from Russia, in September 2005 India ordered six highly advanced Scorpene diesel submarines from France at an estimated cost of US\$ 3 billion.¹⁷

The modernization of Indian Navy has brought changes in Indian Navy's self-perception. In April 2004, it released a new Indian Maritime Doctrine. The document sees the Indian Navy shifting away from its earlier defensive doctrine centred on coastal protection to an aggressively competitive strategy which strives for developing a credible minimum nuclear deterrence (MND), pursuing littoral warfare and dominating the Indian Ocean region. It portrays a vision of the Indian Navy endeavouring to project power through "reach, multiplied by sustainability" across its "legitimate areas of interest" stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits.¹⁸

¹⁴ David Scott, *Handbook of India's International Relations*, 25.

¹⁵ "Budget 2012: Military Plays Catch-up but China a Long March Ahead," *Times of India*, March 17, 2012, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/Budget-2012-Military-plays-catch-up-but-China-a-long-march-ahead/articleshow/12300524.cms> (accessed April 10, 2013).

¹⁶ Rashed uz Zaman, "Kautilya: The Indian Strategic Thinker and Indian Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 3 (2006): 231-247.

¹⁷ "India to Buy 6 Scorpene Submarines," *Rediff*, September 12, 2005, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/sep/12def.htm> (accessed April 1, 2013).

¹⁸ Rahul Bedi, "A New Doctrine for the Navy," *Frontline*, July 16, 2004, 46.

Given India's underlying potential and current drive to economic and technological modernization, "a rising India will try to establish regional hegemony just like all the other rising great powers have since Napoleonic times, with the long term goal of achieving great power status on an Asian and perhaps global scale."¹⁹ India's great power aspirations are manifested in its foreign policy also. India will resist any all-weather alliances, instead its strategic partnerships will flourish where the political and economic gains for India are clear. Of note here is that despite different political parties being in power in India, this consensus on great power status has remained unchanged, suggesting a normative resilience in the belief and approach to the acquisition of great power status.

Challenges to Indian Hegemonic Designs

Despite these successes India faces many challenges internally and externally. A state's capacity to influence others and to defy undesired influences results from the country's various forms of hard and soft power. These forms of power include military strength, social cohesion and mobilization, economic resources, technological capacity, quality of governance, and diplomatic and intelligence acumen. A careful analysis of India in each of these realms confirms that the country has just enough power to resist the influence of others but must still make great strides before it can attain significant power over other states and thus in the international system at large.²⁰

Serious lacunas persist to obstruct the growth of a self-reliant military industrial complex in India that amalgamates civilian politicians, the armed forces and the private sector. Unlike great powers, i.e., the P-5 of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the US and the United Kingdom), India does not have a cutting edge domestic military manufacturing base of its own. Lack of an indigenous military technical base has often been exposed whenever prestigious models of combat equipment that were conceived for home-based production failed to be delivered, under-performed in battle or underwent cost and time overruns.²¹ Huge kickbacks in opaque defence import deals have created a permanent vested interest within the Indian bureaucratic machine for buying weapons

¹⁹ M. Pardesi, "Deducing India's Grand Strategy of Regional Hegemony," 55.

²⁰ George Perkovich, "Is India a Major Power?," *Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2003-04): 129-144.

²¹ David Scott, *Handbook of India's International Relations*, 26.

rather than encouraging the rise of transparent domestically made alternatives.²²

As with other ills that often defeat India's hope of climbing the ladder of world power, the glaring inability to establish a competent local arms industry for use and export can be blamed on the country's lack of good governance, a structural dissatisfaction that infiltrates through the body politic. India has earned appreciation as an outstanding player in at least three significantly vital sectors of the 21st century global economy: information technology, biotechnology, and space. On the contrary, however, India is despondently lacking at providing primary education to its large population. Much of India's workforce lacks the basic knowledge and skills compulsory to be valuable in a modern industrial and service economy. The need of adequate rural schooling, especially for girls, enforces a major handicap on India's prospects.²³ The prevalence of a young labour force does not mechanically produce positives, unless India starts to train and equip its teeming millions. Skills deficit in the vocational and technical fields have been described as an ugly "underbelly of India's demographic dividend," as many as 80 per cent of workers lack the qualities consistent with job market requirements.²⁴

The other big lacuna that holds India's economy back is the substandard condition of its infrastructure, which raises the costs of economic transactions, and lowers efficiency and profitability. Persistent lack of electricity is an affliction that has no immediate solution in face of surging demand, diminishing coal resources and limited hydro-electric power potential. The much-touted India-US civilian nuclear deal was sold by the Manmohan Singh government as one of the solutions to power shortages, but nuclear power may well remain only a small speck in India's overall energy mix for decades to come. Contrasting China's approach, which has endeavoured in recent years by spending in alternative fuels that are green-tinted, India is failing to fully seize potential trends of the future. "Energy security" turned out to be a buzz expression as India's economy nurtured, but the enthusiasm and care with which India had to make a timely entry in targeted markets to look for secure supplies of hydrocarbons was missed, while China had already made pacts with African oil giants like Angola and Nigeria in the midst of bilateral foreign aid and

²² Ibid.

²³ George Perkovich, "Is India a Major Power?," 132.

²⁴ A. Palit, "Let's Get Technical," *Financial Express*, December 26, 2009.

infrastructure-building promises. The Chinese petroleum majors succeeded in securing exclusive extraction rights.²⁵

The Jammu and Kashmir issue (J&K) and other irritants such as Siachen Glacier, remain continuous flashpoints between Pakistan and India due to their active nature. Pakistan has been resisting Indian domination and has shown great resolve to settle these issues on basis of equality. The Kashmir issue has the potential to lead to full-scale conventional conflict between the two nuclear armed states. Moreover, India's unsolved territorial and boundary dispute with China and an un-demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the Indo-Tibetan border do not predict long-term peace and stability between these two Asian giants. Hence, settlement of Kashmir issue and good border management will remain a major security imperative for India for many decades to come.

The recent gains made by the Taliban in Afghanistan and their proposed inclusion in future political arrangement will have major consequences for India. India's arrogance towards the Taliban and the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and efforts to disrupt and destroy Taliban militia under international supervision and undue support for the Northern Alliance will be a challenge for India in the future.

Conclusion

While India is seen as a great power candidate, her border issues are stumbling blocks to freeing her influence away from South Asia and into the international system. India's fractured society and the dissident groups especially the Naxalites who early in the 21st century were active in a third of the country, as well as other groups in its north-east also remain a worry for domestic Indian politics. India's huge population is also India's potential Achilles' heel as it modernizes, draining resources for a population that currently remains generally highly illiterate, unskilled and impoverished. India's challenge to ameliorate such conditions seems even harder when comparisons with other major powers are made, and it will take much time to achieve higher living standards for the Indians. High incidence of corruption, bureaucratic lethargy and apathy in law implementation, all exacerbate these factors.

Unlike the established great powers that can rely on extant state capacity to implement and sustain a grand strategy, for emerging powers, such as India, the process of internal generation of power resources itself is paramount. A nation's aggregate potential can only be converted to material

²⁵ David Scott, *Handbook of India's International Relations*, 30.

capabilities if the state exerts its influence upon the nation's latent resources (financial, industrial, scientific, natural, etc.). The structure and quality of a national economy require a conscious strategic direction and sound public policies, if leading edge technologies are to be innovated and adopted and military-technical capabilities are to be autonomously developed. It may suffice to say the prevailing Indian approach of an unsystematic process of power generation will only produce ad hoc outcomes. Close analysis of India's policies and strategies shows that India can not gain the status of a leading power unless it resolves all issues with its neighbouring states. ■