



Indian Border Security Force soldiers take part in the unit's 58th Raising Day Parade in Amritsar, India, on Dec. 4, 2022. The security force guards India's borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

## India as a Great Power?

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Almost since its emergence as an independent state following the end of the British Empire in South Asia, key members of India's political leadership have opined that the country was destined for great-power status. Their arguments, in the initial years after India's independence, were mostly based on civilizational grounds. One of the principal exponents of this view, of course, was India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In his magisterial work, "The Discovery of India," Nehru wrote, "She [India] has the right to reclaim in universal history the rank

that ignorance has refused her for a long time and to hold her place amongst the great nations."

This chapter will unfold as follows: It will first discuss Nehru's attempts to play a significant role on the global stage. It will then address how his successors fitfully continued those efforts. Finally, it will assess where India currently stands in this quest for great-power status and what policy choices are probably necessary for it to proceed on a possible glide path to great-power status.



## Tilting at Windmills?

As India's first prime minister, despite the country's myriad material weaknesses, Nehru fashioned a foreign policy that would enable the country to play a role in global affairs that transcended its corporeal shortcomings. As is well known, along with Sukarno of Indonesia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, he founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India's participation in this movement gave it a voice in the international order far greater than what its physical capabilities had warranted.<sup>1</sup>

Among other matters, Nehru underscored the importance of the role of multilateral organizations, most notably the United Nations, in promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes. To that end, India played a critical role in the Korean conflict as a member of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC).<sup>2</sup> It was also a key member of the International Control Commission (ICC) following the French withdrawal from Vietnam after the fall of their garrison at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>3</sup> He also boosted the cause of global nuclear disarmament. Indeed, in April 1954, he issued a call to the United Nations to adopt a "standstill agreement" on nuclear testing.<sup>4</sup>

## The 1962 Border War and After

These initiatives notwithstanding, India's military weaknesses were laid bare when border negotiations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) reached a deadlock in 1960, following which the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched an attack along disputed borders in October 1962. The well-armed and battle-hardened PLA, which had carefully planned the onslaught, imposed a disastrous defeat on an ill-prepared and militarily underequipped Indian army.<sup>5</sup>

This war, in considerable part, not only reduced Nehru's stature in global affairs but also made clear to India's foreign policy elite that the ideational orientation of its foreign and security policies had distinct limits. As a consequence, Nehru's successors fitfully sought to acquire the sinews of material power. These efforts, however, were hindered in considerable part due to the country's deeply flawed economic policies that hobbled both growth and poverty alleviation.<sup>6</sup> Though

Nehru's successors continued to espouse many of his policies both at home and abroad, the country's role in global politics proved to be significantly diminished for decades. For complex reasons, after it carried out a nuclear test in 1974, India faced such a raft of crippling global sanctions that its clandestine nuclear weapons program all but became dormant. Bluntly stated, for much of the remaining years of the Cold War, India was all but an irrelevant actor on the international stage.<sup>7</sup>

## A Resurgent India

It was not until an unprecedented fiscal crisis in 1991, in the wake of the first Gulf War, that the country finally managed to turn a corner on multiple fronts, thereby bringing it closer to its long-term quest for great-power status. In the aftermath of this extraordinary crisis, India's policymakers undertook major economic reforms even in the face of considerable domestic opposition. Within years after these market-friendly reforms, the country witnessed significantly higher rates of economic growth and also saw dramatic reductions in both rural and urban poverty.

These market-friendly reforms also contributed to the country becoming a significant investment destination for global corporations. In 1995, the United States Department of Commerce declared India to be one of the world's "big emerging markets." Simultaneously, a number of its own conglomerates, ranging from the information technology firm Infosys to the vast industrial corporation Tata and Sons, entered the global arena.

Apart from rapid economic growth, the country, under a new right-of-center Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, also started to shed many of its Cold War-era shibboleths and inhibitions. The most important of these involved its stated aversion to the utility of force in international politics. Even though Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as well as her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, had demonstrated a large degree of pragmatism when it came to the use of force, they had nevertheless not abandoned the Nehruvian rhetoric about eschewing the resort to force in global affairs. After coming to power in 1998, the BJP government, which had long accepted the significance of material power in global politics, conducted a series of five nuclear tests.



Former U.S. President Bill Clinton meets with students of the Ram Rati Gupta Women's Polytechnic school of Rampur, Uttar Pradesh state, during a breakfast meeting in New Delhi in 2003. (Raveendran / AFP via Getty Images)

These tests, quite unsurprisingly, led to widespread condemnations from much of the international community, and the United States in particular. Worse still, the U.S. led the world in imposing a series of sanctions on India's nuclear weapons and space programs.

Despite this initial harsh reaction, the Clinton administration started a dialogue with India in the hope that it might be able to persuade the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government to reverse its nuclear weapons program. This effort, however, proved to be mostly unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, the George W. Bush administration concluded it was worth abandoning the U.S.'s unyielding commitment to nonproliferation to try to enlist India in a strategy designed to bolster it as a possible counterweight to the PRC in Asia. To that end, it negotiated a nuclear accord with India that enabled New Delhi to maintain its nuclear weapons program.<sup>9</sup> This agreement, which for all practical purposes legitimized India's nuclear weapons program, brought it one step closer toward realizing its goal of becoming a great power.

### **A Great Power in the Making?**

In 2014, the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) party suffered its worst electoral defeat in decades. The BJP won a clear-cut victory and assumed office. Despite significant ideological differences, the new government did not markedly alter the economic policies of its predecessor. The commitment to economic liberalization that the INC had initiated as early as 1991 mostly remained in place. The BJP did, however, make some noticeable changes in the realm of domestic policies relating to social and cultural issues, as well as some important changes to foreign policy. Among other matters, it dispensed with India's hoary commitment to nonalignment. This was evident when Narendra Modi became the first popularly elected prime minister to ever skip the Non-Aligned Summit held in Margarita, Venezuela, in 2016. Since then, the Ministry of External Affairs has rarely, if ever, invoked the use of the well-worn term in its official communiqués.



People play amid poor visibility at India Gate in New Delhi in November 2020.  
(Arvind Yadav / Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Also, despite some lingering concerns about the reliability and steadfastness of the United States, especially as it involved ties with India's nettlesome neighbor Pakistan, the BJP government has shed many of the ideological inhibitions that had stood in the way of a closer strategic partnership with the United States. To that end, after nearly a decade of temporizing on the part of prior governments, the Modi's BJP government signed three important "foundational agreements" with the United States, thereby facilitating closer strategic ties in the realms of military communications, logistics, and geospatial cooperation. All three of these agreements will facilitate security cooperation with the U.S. and also enable India to cope better with the renewed emerging security threat from the PRC. The shedding of the ideological baggage from the Cold War era and the concomitant growing strategic cooperation with the United States are part and parcel of India's quest to play a more consequential role in global politics.

Yet it is important to underscore that New Delhi will need to overcome its reservations about a more fulsome strategic partnership with the United States to enable it to contend with the unrelenting threat from the PRC. On its own, given the many deficiencies of its defense industrial base and its slothful defense acquisition process, it cannot muster the requisite military capabilities to ward off the threat from the PRC.

These two policy shifts may well bring India closer to its long-standing goal of achieving great-power status. However, a failure to forthrightly tackle a number of other domestic policy issues as well as certain political choices may well hobble the country's efforts to achieve that goal. Each of these deserves some discussion. The first, and most obvious, is that despite nearly two decades of substantial economic growth, the country still remains saddled with vast swatches of both rural and urban poverty.<sup>10</sup> According to reliable sources, as many as 228 million Indians remain below the official poverty line, thereby leaving the country with the largest number of poor in the world.<sup>11</sup> Unless India's policymakers can make a significant dent on poverty, the country's ability to play a wider role in international politics will be stymied.

Second, in its attempt to promote rapid economic growth, India may be sacrificing its environment. The environmental challenges that the country faces are too numerous to discuss in this chapter. Suffice to say, however, that the pitfalls it confronts are far from trivial. These include shortages of water, air pollution, and loss of biodiversity, among others.<sup>12</sup>

Third, any number of authoritarian states have emerged as great powers; in fact, the number of states that are both democracies as well as great powers are limited, and indeed constitute a recent historical phenomenon. That being said, India's lurch toward authoritarianism may prove to be an impediment to its evolution as a great power. The reasons for



this are straightforward: Its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity are legendary. Governing a country with India's extent of cultural pluralism poses unique challenges and is singularly ill-suited to a repressive political dispensation. Democracy, albeit with various flaws, has enabled India to manage its diversity despite a brief period of authoritarian rule in the late 1970s under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's "state of emergency." India's current lurch toward political illiberalism and retreat from democratic values and principles could well pose significant problems for domestic social and political order and thereby subvert its rise in world affairs.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth and finally, to enable it to concentrate on and cope with the security challenge it faces from the PRC, it is in New Delhi's interest to fashion a long-term strategy to reach a rapprochement with Pakistan. While Pakistan and the Kashmir dispute are unlikely

to stop India's rise, they can certainly slow down the process.<sup>14</sup> India's inability to terminate the rivalry with Pakistan, or at least to forge a successful strategy of deterrence, will continue to sap the energies of its foreign and security policy establishments and constitute an important impediment to the realization of great-power status. Unfortunately, given Pakistan's present internal disarray and the presence of a Hindu chauvinist government in New Delhi, the prospects of a rapprochement with Pakistan seem rather dim. However, unless India can fashion a robust policy of deterrence by denial or overcome its deep-seated reservations about reaching out to Pakistan despite the latter's continuing dalliance with terror, its nettlesome neighbor will remain an albatross around New Delhi's neck.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of these policy choices, it appears unlikely, despite its long-held aspiration, that New Delhi will emerge in the front rank of global powers.



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