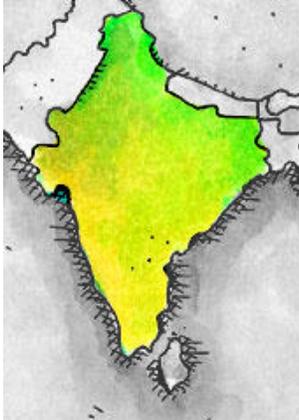


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India: Great Power or Not?

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

The recent unprecedented terrorist attacks in India's commercial capital, Mumbai, not only caused painful destruction of lives and physical infrastructure but also stuck a huge question mark over the country's aspiration to be internationally recognized as a great power. Sreeram Chaulia explains.

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For nearly two decades, India's ability to shrug off the fetters of state socialism and grow economically at an average of 6-9% per annum have caused this "emerging power" to be viewed as a new mover and shaker in world affairs.

The projection by many experts that India could be the world's second- or third-largest economy by 2025 — combined with its possession of nuclear weapons — means that it is a force to reckon with in the future. Size, productivity, demography, military muscle and human capital all work in India's favor as it marches to claim its rightful place under the sun.

Modern security challenges

The one major stain in this otherwise fine record is India's inability to defeat the terrorist threat to its national security. Since the disastrous war with China in 1962, India has not ceded one inch of land to a hostile state — a fairly successful pedigree in defending territorial integrity.

India has no escape but to tackle head-on the permanent threat of jihadi terror lurking across its borders.

However, unending separatist insurgencies in Kashmir and the North East, both fueled by neighboring countries, and the ideological insurrections of Maoists in a number of states have posed major security challenges to India and raised specters of its Balkanization under the pressure of divisive tendencies.

Origins of terrorism

The terrorist menace that hounds India in the form of regular bombings, suicide attacks and assassinations is either tangentially or culturally related to secessionism. Most of the Islamist jihadi terrorist groups that routinely take a heavy toll of civilian and military lives across India have roots in Pakistan and Bangladesh and derive their ideology from the alleged oppression of Muslims in India.

A potent mixture of foreign policy antagonisms and violent religious fanaticism generates the political economy of jihad against India and frequently mocks India's claims to be sovereign over its entire landmass.

Weaknesses exposed

The latest terrorist carnage in Mumbai, traced to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyaba ("Army of the Pure"), was an affront to India's sovereignty. For over 60 hours, India's economic engine, Mumbai, was virtually under the control of ten religiously hardened killers of Pakistani nationality.

In two-and-a-half days of mayhem, Lashkar's holy warriors exposed the weaknesses of India's national security and response systems for the umpteenth time. This raises a crucial question: Can a state that is repeatedly defenseless against the infiltration and impunity of religious zealots from across its borders be considered a great power?

Simply outperforming Pakistan and matching China in economic growth will not be a sufficient demonstration of India's greatness.

Testing India's power

Even more relevant to India's international status and reputation is its response after the terrorist siege of Mumbai ended. In international relations, power is commonly defined as the ability to influence or pressure another actor to do what one wishes her to do.

With post mortem investigations of the terror plot clearly pointing in the direction of Pakistan, whether India can get its recalcitrant neighbor to do what it prefers is a litmus test for New Delhi's great power pretensions.

Avoiding the past

For India's sake, past had better not be prologue. In December 2001,

The proof of genuine greatness in world affairs will be when India manages to change Pakistan's behavior for the better.

Pakistan-trained jihadis from Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and its sister outfit, Jaish-i-Muhammad, attacked the Parliament of India and narrowly missed decimating the country's top leadership in one fell swoop.

New Delhi reacted by launching its largest troop mobilization for war along the international border with Pakistan in an attempt to compel Islamabad to hand over a list of culprits wanted for terrorist attacks.

Operation Parakram's positioning of some 500,000 soldiers failed to achieve the stated end because Pakistan also mobilized its soldiers. After ten months, India withdrew its troops from the frontlines without any success.

Unconventional responses

The lessons for India from the 2001 incident is that unconventional threats like terrorism cannot be solved through conventional measures like full-scale war. A more targeted counter-strike capability, where the objective is to decapitate the leadership and infrastructure of jihadi organizations flourishing in Pakistan, would meet the goal for New Delhi as it struggles to construct a "compellence" strategy after the Mumbai attacks.

Assassinating some of the most-wanted terrorists enjoying the hospitality of Pakistan's army and the notorious spy agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), would send an unambiguous message that if Islamabad is unwilling to act, then New Delhi has the means to protect itself.

Foreign influences

Compared to 2001, India's relationship with the United States is another arrow in the

quiver vis-à-vis Pakistan's sponsorship of Islamist terror. To the extent possible, Washington says that it is persuading Islamabad to cooperate with New Delhi and bring terrorists to justice.

U.S. foreign policy towards Pakistan is complicated by the war against the Taliban, for which Washington needs Islamabad on its side. Ironically, promptly after the Mumbai attacks, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban, who are allies of Afghan Taliban) showed their true colors by "contacting" the government in Islamabad and offering their services against India. Qari Hussain, a top commander of the Tehreek, commented that his men are "not anti-state and are ready to die for the motherland."

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Underscoring the degree of murkiness and collusion, the Pakistani military reciprocated with a startling statement in the Pakistani daily, The News, that "some notorious militant commanders, including Baitullah Mehsud and (Maulana) Fazlullah, (are) patriotic Pakistanis with whom we have no issues."

Pakistani terror collusion?

These same "patriots" had hitherto been blamed by the Pakistan army for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and for various terrorist attacks on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. Thus, it blows the cover off the rhetorical protestations of the Pakistani government that "non-state actors" are causing terror without the collusion of the state machinery.

Either way one wants to turn it, how well India can marshal its relations with the United States and other key world powers to get Pakistan to extradite the terrorist fugitives will also be a measure of its great power ambitions. The curse of geography destined India to deal sternly with Pakistan following the atrocities in Mumbai or face repetitions of the same audacity shown by the Lashkar terrorists.

Neighborly issues

Since neighbors cannot be chosen, India has no escape but to tackle head-on the permanent threat of jihadi terror lurking across its borders. Inaction after the Mumbai attacks will embolden the jihadi war machine in Pakistan and further diminish India's status.

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Islamabad's adamant denials of complicity in the Mumbai attacks are generating rumors that the Indian air force might resort to aerial bombing of the Lashkar's headquarters in Muridke, outside the Pakistani city of Lahore, and other marked terrorist training camps on Pakistani soil. Through skilful diplomacy, India will have to ensure that such an action does not escalate into all-out war with Pakistan, which is not in either country's or the United States' interests.

One of the big unknowns in this scenario is the stance of China, Pakistan's closest strategic ally and beneficiary, which has a frosty security relationship with India. New Delhi will have to take calculated risks by holding China to its word of being opposed to religious extremism and terrorism.

Domestic concerns

Simply outperforming Pakistan and matching China in economic growth will not be a sufficient demonstration of India's greatness. The attacks in Mumbai stand as gory reminders that economic development does not guarantee a country's security. Innovative social mobilization at home and a proactive foreign policy abroad are the twin imperatives if Indians are to feel safe again on their streets.

Domestically, India is plagued by poor intelligence gathering at the grassroots level, where terrorists and their accomplices take shelter in the anonymity of urban life and dodge the authorities. For early detection and prevention of terrorist plots, Indian

society will have to step up to the plate and organize into neighborhood watch committees on a voluntary basis in order to keep a constant vigil on suspicious or extremist behavior and share tips with law enforcers.

Of particular concern is the exposure of some young Indian Muslims to extreme Islamist philosophies emanating from countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Unless social service institutions mobilize and organize people to promote values of tolerance and unity, disaffected Indian youth will continue to fall prey to fundamentalist indoctrination and act as the local cogs of global jihadi networks.

The path to great power

A great power is one that can shape its international environment in a manner that is conducive to its own interests. The converse is a prototypical banana republic that allows its environs to determine its fate.

Of late, India has fancied itself with titles like "knowledge superpower" and "super empowerer," even while its own house was being set ablaze by Islamist terrorists. The proof of genuine greatness in world affairs will be when India saves its society from bigotry and manages to change Pakistan's behavior for the better.

Should New Delhi fail to accomplish these goals, it will have to reckon with the disappointing tags of "almost there" and "still emerging" rather than a true great power.

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