

India's 'power' attributes

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As the economic power, cultural reach, and political influence of India increase, it is assuming a more influential role in global affairs.

(US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defence Review*, 2010)

India can't actually compete with China in a number of areas, like international influence, overall national power and economic scale. India apparently has not yet realised this.

('India's Unwise Military Moves', *Global Times*, 11 June 2009)

Introduction: knocking on the door

Power in the international system has always remained concentrated in a select few hands instead of being equally or equitably distributed among all its constituent actors. While the normative domain of International Relations (IR) terminology contains concepts like equality of all sovereign nation-states in terms of status and dignity, the realm of *power politics* accepts and promotes hierarchy and vertical positioning of states within environments likened euphemistically to totem poles or food chains.

In this world of haves and have-nots, high tables and low tables, big leagues and small fries, consequential and trivial, gaining admittance into the sanctum sanctorum of accepted elite states is an ambition that several nurture but very few succeed in achieving. The failure rate is high because of the ultra-competitive nature of the struggle to rise up the ranks and to be acknowledged as already 'arrived' on the scene. Aspirants ('wannabes') of every era and different levels of vanity have tried knocking on the door of the hallowed portals of the Great Powers, but only the most capable and strategically astute players have crossed the threshold and remained inside on a sustainable basis.

Thanks to IR *realism* theory, the term 'capabilities' looms large in any discussion of a state's chances of making it into the charmed circle. Without taking stock of a state's arsenal of power attributes, i.e. the component strengths that make it a contender for the title of a crucial mover and shaker in world affairs, one cannot rationally assess claims and counter-claims about who really matters in a given international system. IR *realist* scholars have devoted ample space to

classifying, categorizing and measuring states' core capabilities, giving us a rich (though incomplete) framework to begin evaluating countries on the power barometer.

This chapter draws on both IR *realist* literature as well as other theoretical camps, to size up the elements that constitute the might of one of the most currently talked-about states in world politics: India. Since the turn of the century, academics, practitioners and journalists commenting on the subject of which countries occupy the power list or are on their way onto it have tended to progressively give India a customary mention.¹ The world's largest democracy has frequently, somewhat to the consternation of Indians proud of their liberal political system, also been paired up with the People's Republic of China as the 'other' big mentionable Asian success story that must be reckoned with in international affairs.² The fact that both these Asian giants rode out practically unscathed from the global economic downturn since 2008 has only increased attention and focus on India as a special case, and a leader the power and presence of which are on the way up.³ Observers interested in the changing global power configuration from *unipolarity* to *multipolarity* also regularly cite India as one among a few new centres of influence that are transforming the structure and processes of conducting international relations.⁴

What exactly has India done by way of steady accumulation of different elements of national power that is causing these bouts of expectation and optimism about its enhanced importance in the scheme of world politics? India's inventory of muscle must be counted and valued using theoretical measures of power to judge whether announcements of its indispensability to international relations in the contemporary age are premature, overblown or just right. This chapter argues that India's *hard* and *soft power* attributes have improved over the last decade, but that it suffers from internal and external bottlenecks that threaten to leave it permanently frozen in the 'not quite there' category of aspirants to the annals of Great Powers.

Military underdog to credible deterrent

In IR *realist* literature and the rulebooks of practical exponents of *realpolitik*, a state's capabilities are synonymous with its military sinews. To them, all roads in measuring power attributes lead to military potential because war is an ever-present reality in a competitive world with no world government and numerous latent or active strategic threats. Defence indicators hold the key to grading a self-interested state's power for realists, who envisage an international system that approximates 'state of nature' (Thomas Hobbes), where preparation for war is the best solution to optimize security and be respected or feared by other selfish states. To cite IR *neorealism* guru John Mearsheimer, 'I define power largely in military terms because offensive realism emphasises that force is the *ultima ratio* of world politics'.⁵

Confictual mapping of the world, where another state may exploit relatively weak military or national security systems of one's own state and either launch an actual armed attack or engage in long-term destabilization, remains the hallmark of different variants of IR *realism*. Self-help doctrines that reflect IR *security dilemma* dynamics therefore insist that there is no short cut to constant military modernization and improvement of national security apparatuses to keep pace with or one step ahead of anticipated or surprise threats. In grand strategy, a true Great Power should have a strong and self-sufficient military with adept offensive and defensive abilities that have wide outreach to project power and meet political objectives far beyond one's own geographic confines.

The former Soviet strongman and instinctive realist, Joseph Stalin, once famously quipped that the Pope could hardly gain admission onto the main chess board of world politics because he lacked large, well-armed, trained and penetrative military 'divisions' under his command.

The Indian strategic elite woke up to this truism in 1962, when the people's Republic of China ambushed and vanquished the poorly equipped and under-prepared Indian army in a humiliating border war that Chairman Mao Zedong likened to a 'lesson' in gunpowder politics to a state he deemed a pushover.⁶ Since this calamity, which still rankles in the memories of Indian nationalists, successive civilian governments and their advisers have stressed the imperative of continuous military renovation and upgrading of different segments of India's national defence architecture and doctrine. India's Cold War closeness to the USSR came in handy since the mid-1960s for raising the quality of its weapons systems, as Moscow had geopolitical incentives to offer New Delhi rupee payment-based 'sweetheart' import deals. In a foreign exchange and cash-strapped developing country saddled with a socialist 'Hindu rate of economic growth' and huge welfare state commitments to social sectors, the Soviet hand was crucial for India to match the military expansions in Pakistan and China, the two traditional continental foes, the relative capabilities of which were most cautiously watched by India. Concessionary imports of state-of-the-art Soviet weaponry during certain periods of spurts helped New Delhi assuage domestic critics and pressures about the foregone opportunity costs in terms of social sector budgetary allocations. However, the classic 'guns versus butter' dilemma of whether a poor democratic country could afford to 'crowd out' scarce resources to the military has often dragged down the Indian state's commitment to robust defence spending. Prominent economists and civil society groups have consistently demanded attention to the 'social costs of militarism',⁷ especially in light of very low human development indices in the country.

A glance at the ebbs and flows in India's defence spending in the 1990s shows that the lows correspond with tight economic conditions, balance of payments crises and dependence on conditional foreign aid. IR *realists* from Hans Morgenthau to Kenneth Waltz have insisted that a sound and growing economy is essential to maintaining strong military capability. As long as India was economically growing at a snail's speed and remained a bound elephant, both purchasing power and domestic production infrastructure in the military sphere were limited due to pocketbook shortages. The remarkable surge in the Indian gross domestic product (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. None the less, despite media-labelled 'whopping' increases in defence spending over the last several years, India continues to have relatively moderate military expenditure averaging around 2% of GDP. Laments from strategists and long-range planners that such outlays are 'grossly inadequate' and need to be reaching 3.5% of GDP by 2015⁸ do not always find favour among civilian politicians, who tend to be reactive on national security needs and are more amenable to opening the purse immediately after a war or a major terrorist attack.

Electoral compulsions of ruling parties, including the urge to spend largesse on populist welfare schemes to win votes, have also held back India from keeping the defence spending-to-GDP ratio on a par with undemocratic China or Pakistan. The lobbying power and valid arguments of the three wings of the Indian military—army, navy and air force—and of their civilian counterparts in the Ministry of Defence to increase allocations for hardware purchases, research and development, and personnel costs⁹ does not fully convince India's crafty civilian political top brass. The irony here is that India, which unlike many of its neighbours in South Asia has remained stubbornly democratic and free of armed *coups d'état*, has a civil-military relations problem when it comes to critical issues like army pay scales, creating an integrated Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), decisions about materiel procurement, etc.¹⁰ Serious lacunae continue to also hinder the growth of a self-sufficient military industrial complex in India that integrates civilian politicians, the armed forces and the private sector. Unlike Great Powers like

the P-5 Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the USA 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 like a sore thumb 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. Patronage-style politics in awarding contracts only to parastatals have survived in the touch-me-not defence sector, even though the rest of Indian industry has enjoyed the benefits of economic liberalization since 1991.¹¹ The 'commanding heights' argument to defend closure of defence production from competitive private bidders has come in for criticism from Indian analysts concerned about over-dependence of the military on foreign suppliers like Russia, Israel, France, the United Kingdom and the USA, but to no avail. Huge kickbacks in opaque defence import deals have created a permanent vested interest within the Indian bureaucratic machine for buying weapons rather than encouraging the rise of transparent domestically made alternatives.¹² 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 notorious lack of good governance, a structural malaise that percolates through the body politic.

One of the bright spots for which India does get noticed world-wide for military prowess is its navy, the value of which as a force multiplier for the country's global power projection has risen with foreign policy shifts of the last two decades. Some Indian policy specialists have bemoaned the country's ossified 'continental mentality' that is obsessed with meeting land-based threats, primarily from Pakistan and China, and have sought strategic reorientation that capitalizes on the vast oceanic reach of a true world-class 'blue water' navy.¹³ Given that all landed territory on the planet is demarcated and parcelled out into sovereign boundaries that are not to be legally trespassed by state armies, and the extreme sensitivity and zealotry with which national airspaces are monitored and protected, the only relatively free spaces in which a state's military can stretch far beyond its immediate environs are the high seas. Extension by means of a navy into 'out of area' waters has been an old strategy of empires world-wide, including the medieval-era south Indian Cholas who spread their vast political influence from Sri Lanka to Indonesia, Cambodia and Viet Nam through advanced naval formations.

It is these very South-East Asian pastures that were rediscovered by New Delhi in the 1990s as valuable for furthering India's trade and strategic interests. Dubbed the 'Look East' policy, India entered into sustained involvement in building military and economic agreements with South-East Asian countries with an implicit objective of acting as a strategic counterweight to a menacingly powerful China. The Indian Navy is central to this policy and has been deployed for joint exercises and patrols along with likeminded partner states in the South China Sea, which have a host of island disputes with China and are nervous about becoming subservient to the dragon. India's navy was also a principal in five-nation exercises in the Bay of Bengal between 2007 and 2009 that included participation from the navies of Japan, Australia and the USA, which were also eager to balance the rising Chinese sphere of influence in South-East and East Asia. On the westward horizon, too, India's navy grabbed world attention in the last few years by dispatching naval ships to the Gulf of Aden off Yemen and Somalia to try and help rein in the international scourge of piracy through strong-arm methods.¹⁴ How successfully India's diplomats and navy can ward off China's so-called 'string of pearls' strategy of building naval bases in and around the Indian Ocean will be another theatre that will be closely scrutinized as a mark of Great Power-like behaviour.

India's de facto nuclear weapons power status since 1998 is another factor that has earned it grudging recognition as a major player in international relations. By shedding a decades-long

ambiguous closet nuclear power position and testing atomic devices, India crossed a Rubicon and stoically endured Western sanctions, Pakistani tit-for-tat tests and Chinese condemnation. With a reported arsenal of 60 to 70 nuclear warheads and a capacity to build bombs with yields of up to 200 kilotons, India has managed to raise hackles both in Islamabad and Beijing for steadfastly pursuing a burning 'desire to become a world power'.¹⁵ Admittedly, possession of nuclear weapons has not shielded India from sub-threshold war with Pakistan in 1999 or a barrage of non-conventional terrorist threats from Islamist *jihadi* outfits. The psychological impact of a New Delhi that keeps and updates a credible nuclear deterrent, including a retaliatory strike capability deliverable from a 'triad' of land-, air- and sea-based platforms, is bound to dissuade the conventionally superior Chinese military in the context of a long drawn-out border dispute and intense strategic competition between the two Asian colossi. To preserve moving goalposts of deterrence, New Delhi has resisted US calls to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by forwarding the precondition of Beijing and Washington inking the dotted line first. Whether India can convert its nuclear weapons capability into concrete security and political gains in the international arena remains a key subject area of interest in the coming decades.

Neither Hans Morgenthau's 'elements of national power', nor Kenneth Waltz's 'determinants of state capabilities' were compiled during times when terrorism by state-backed or independent violent non-state actors had become a national security nightmare in the West. India's self-description as one of the world's longest suffering victims of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan (and secondarily, Bangladesh) necessitates evaluation of counter-terrorism capacity as an integral ingredient of its overall military power. Securing India's disputed borders with antagonistic neighbour Pakistan has been an ordeal in peacetime since independence because of the latter's resort to non-regular Islamist *mujahideen* (holy warriors) infiltrators who are ideologically zealous about 'freeing' Kashmir and are unafraid of death.¹⁶ India's armed forces and paramilitaries have, over time, learnt lessons and managed to stem the flow and movement of *jihadists* from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir into the Indian-controlled part, but not a year goes by without fresh reports of successful ingress and brutal slayings of innocent civilians by terrorists who sneak into Indian territory, often under cover of artillery shelling by the regular Pakistani army.¹⁷ While the defensive shields against Pakistani *jihadists* are being beefed-up, especially since the completion of a protective fence along the border in Kashmir and efforts to improve domestic policing, India's counter-offensive capability to deter terrorist outfits based in Pakistan has not materialized at all. While there is no dearth of Indian intelligence penetration in Pakistani society and the state apparatus,¹⁸ India has been unable to penetrate Pakistan's state-backed *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JeM) conglomerates. Although an Indian military head claimed after a deadly Pakistan-abetted terrorist attack in early 2002 that his forces had concrete information of training camps and hideouts of Pakistani *jihadist* groups on Pakistani soil, and could destroy them with a barrage of missiles or aerial bombardment if they got the political green light,¹⁹ no concrete action has been undertaken to raise the costs of *jihad*. After the outrage caused by the Mumbai terror attacks of December 2008 and demands for prompt retaliation, this option of covert, plausibly deniable and targeted anti-terror strikes was again spoken about in strategic circles,²⁰ but nothing seems to have come of it. India habitually wrings its hands that wanted terrorist ringleaders roam about freely in Pakistan (and to a lesser extent in Bangladesh and Nepal) with state cover and patronage, but this does not succeed in changing the behaviour of nettlesome neighbours. In this context, it is doubtful whether an Indian state 'that is repeatedly defenceless against the infiltration and impunity of religious zealots from across its border [can] be considered a Great Power'.²¹ A 'flabby state' that keeps muddling through with routine intelligence and security failures and presents itself like a sitting duck for

terrorists to raid and destroy at will is not going to be taken seriously in its own backyard, not to mention on the wider world stage.²²

One of the ironies of India's external image as an Information Technology superpower is that it has been subjected to several waves of cyber attacks by 'hacktivists' from Pakistan and China, who intend to wage a propaganda war, spy on sensitive diplomatic data and disrupt the communication infrastructure. This author was informed by senior Indian intelligence officials in charge of cyber-defence and counter-attack operations that China is by far the most sophisticated threat in this realm and that Beijing is further ahead in the game than New Delhi. On numerous occasions in the past few years, hackers traceable to mainland China have managed to breach the information systems of India's elite governmental circles, including the Ministry of External Affairs, the Office of the National Security Adviser and the Prime Minister's Office.²³ China's lead in this powerful new capability is owing to an uncharacteristically liberal environment fostered by the communist authorities for strategically minded cyber-criminals to set up base and operate on the world-wide web without fear of repercussions. India was relatively slower to start down this path, due to inbuilt techno-illiteracy and the wariness of ageing bureaucrats who man the national security structure, as well as turf battles among different ministries over which agency should be leading the cyber-war programme. An infusion of young blood, however, especially from among the brainy IT 'whiz kids' in the country's private sector, has begun to raise the level of India's capability to thwart Chinese and other cyber attackers from wreaking havoc. The realization that 21st-century warfare will rely greatly on information domination has grown in Indian strategic thinking, and plenty of budgetary resources have been placed at the command of the country's cyber sentinels to tap into the nation's vast pool of talented computer engineers and 'netizens' for intercepting threats and also turning them on the perpetrators.

The unbound elephant

Economic growth and vitality are universally viewed as quintessential power attributes of a state, and underpin the Manmohan Doctrine on Indian foreign policy. IR *realist* scholars from Morgenthau and Waltz up to Mearsheimer accord prime place to economic factors in measuring the total power of states, because a bouncing and competitive economy can devote more resources to the defence sector and convert healthy GDP into relatively greater military might. IR *liberal* figures like Robert Keohane concur with IR *realists* on this point and emphasize that 'economic strength is ultimately the basis for economic and military power'.²⁴ The economy has also been the central explanatory variable for the genre of 'declinism' (Samuel Huntington, Paul Kennedy) in IR, which attempts to identify general theoretical laws for the rise and fall of Great Powers throughout history. The collective wisdom of rationalist IR traditions is also shared by the mass media and popular perceptions that a rising or accomplished Great Power can be identified by its inherent economic dynamism, productivity, and ability to keep growing in size and quality. Much of the commentary about the increasing power of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the concomitant decline of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries stems from the former's increasing share in the world economy and the latter's stagnation and recessionary crises that seem to be structurally incorrigible.²⁵

India itself began to be re-evaluated in much of global consciousness as a powerful state only after it entered a higher economic growth trajectory of over 8% per annum since 2003, touching 10.1% in the third quarter of 2006.²⁶ To be spoken of in the same league as China, India had to raise and then sustain GDP growth at such a fast rate. That has been achieved due

to a combination of two phases of liberalization of state controls on the economy, inflow of vast amounts of foreign investment, and exposure of Indian producers to foreign competition. A surge in the manufacturing sector and continued expansion in the service sectors (finance, insurance, real estate, telecoms, software and IT-enabled services) have underpinned the post-2003 boom,²⁷ which slowed during the initial shock of the global financial crisis in 2008–09, but recovered during 2009–10 to reach 7.4% for the whole year, having accelerated still further back up to 8.8% in the second quarter of 2010. Because domestic consumption drove the bulk of the Indian economy, most of its sectors succeeded in weathering the post-2008 global contagion of steep falls in foreign consumer demand and loss of export markets.

Economists are bullish about India's long-term prospects because it is widely perceived to possess the appropriate 'fundamentals'. For instance, researchers at Credit Suisse reckon that the country's 'favourable demographics, a low urbanization rate and still rising savings and investment rates', will ensure that 'capital stock (machinery, physical infrastructure etc), labour and their productivity, will grow rapidly over the next decade, sustaining high real GDP growth rates'.²⁸ Population profile is, in particular, propitious for the Indian economy because the country's dependency ratio (proportion of non-working to working people) is likely to fall further, triggering a virtuous cycle of even higher domestic savings, capital accumulation and investment. With an ageing population, China's economic growth is predicted to slow down by 2020, while India 'will be the locomotive of the future [...] until the middle of this century'.²⁹

Yet, it is clear that simply enjoying a preponderance of young, productive workers in the labour force does not automatically generate positives unless India goes into public policy overdrive to train and equip its teeming millions with skills. Skills shortfalls in the vocational and technical spheres have been described as an ugly 'underbelly of India's demographic dividend', with as many as 80% of workers lacking the qualities consistent with job market requirements.³⁰ While India gets praised for highly qualified human capital in the applied sciences like medicine and engineering, the supply of skilled manpower still falls short of the demands of what is touted as the second fastest growing economy in the world. Massive private and public investment in the education system and reorienting its basics are imperatives for upgrading young Indians' skill sets and increasing their productivity. The yield-per-worker stands to gain impressively if various government- and industry-proposed reforms to give education a practical tinge are effectively implemented.

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. India's roads, bridges, airports, seaports, electricity grids and clean water utilities are chronically under-supplied, deficient, crumbling or outright non-existent, especially in rural areas. Economist Jagdish Bhagwati has calculated that GDP growth could easily go two percentage points higher if the country built up 'decent roads, railways and power'.³¹ Chronic paucity of electricity is a blight that brooks no short-term solution because of surging demand, depleting 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. Unless terms for private investment in the infrastructure sector are made more lucrative, the gap between aspiration to world-class amenities and the moribund reality will keep haunting India's self-image as an emerging powerhouse.

Unlike China, which has taken long strides in recent years by investing in alternative fuels that are green-tinted, India seems to remain in the familiar territory of failing to fully grasp future trends and then having to play catch-up with global leaders. China has moved from sixth

(2007) and fourth (2008) to second (2009) in an Ernst & Young ranking of countries for attractiveness for investment in renewable energy, while India fell to fourth position (2009) from a high of third (2008).³² Competition for investing early in green technologies is tight and India is not doing badly, but it remains to be seen if its relatively weaker industrial base compared with China will in the long run also leave India behind in the capacity to produce for its own domestic energy needs and to export Indian innovations world-wide. It is possible that China's 'Green Leap Forward' will outdistance India by a wide margin, just as it has done in the overall economic growth race.³³

India has been held up by liberals as a shining counter-example to the 'Asian values' theory of former Singaporean strongman Lee Kuan Yew that authoritarian political systems and social values facilitate rapid economic growth.³⁴ India's spectacular economic achievements since 2003, in spite of a resilient and contentious democracy, reconfirm the country's exceptional status as an outlier that does not neatly fit positivist social science explanations. Yet, the compulsions of electoral politics in a hard-fought democracy have sometimes held back necessary market-based economic reforms which could have set the growth rate at a gallop. Inflexible labour laws, high fiscal deficits due to large agrarian subsidies, and resistance to privatization of public sector firms have been identified by scholars as hurdles to speeding up economic growth that remain unaddressed due to their political sensitivity and short-term vote-loss ramifications for India's elected representatives.³⁵ One exponent of quickening the pace of economic reforms commented nearly a decade ago that 'too much democracy and not enough capitalism', and 'placing politics before economics' were two big obstacles to unleashing the full potential of India's economic capabilities.³⁶ Tremendous social churning, redistributive impulses and opportunities presented by the ballot box are indeed paradoxically the causes of India's stable polity and imperfect economy. Since coalition politics, where no single party is capable of forming governments at the central level on its own, has become a permanent feature on the Indian scene, demands for 'liberalizing with a human face' and protecting uncompetitive sectors of the economy to avoid painful adjustment costs will act as speed breakers on the growth rate until long-term shifts occur in the class structure of Indian society itself.

One actionable growth-catalysing strategy that is not structurally precluded by domestic political compulsions is the execution of creative foreign economic diplomacy, an arena in which India has been found to be relatively wanting. New Delhi has always maintained friendly relations with oil-rich Arab countries in the Middle East and taken a pro-Palestinian stand in the Arab-Israeli conflict because of its heavy dependence on remittances and imported petroleum products from that region.³⁷ Newer energy fountainheads emerged in recent decades in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America, though, demanding a focused effort on India's part to approach these hitherto neglected regions with the right mix of economic incentives and geo-strategic selling points. 'Energy security' became a buzz phrase as the Indian economy grew, but the alacrity and thoroughness with which one had to make a timely entry in targeted markets to lock in assured supplies of hydrocarbons was missing. By the time the Indian Government had appointed an Advisory Committee on Oil Diplomacy for Energy Security in late 2004, China had already zeroed-in on African oil giants like Angola and Nigeria with the full might of bilateral foreign aid and infrastructure-building promises as a cushion for Chinese petroleum majors to go on acquiring exclusive extraction rights and reserving oil blocks at a dizzying rate. In 2007 Beijing formed a giant sovereign wealth fund, the China Investment Corporation (CIC), to help state-run companies aggressively acquire oil, coal and metal assets abroad. India was again late in discovering the benefits of this public-private partnership model to enhance its economic footprint and secure assured energy channels. It was only in March 2010 that the Ministry of Petroleum floated the idea of a sovereign fund by setting aside part of India's

US \$254,000m. in foreign exchange reserves to assist Indian energy majors 'take on competition from their Chinese counterparts'.³⁸ The spectacle of India losing bids to China or not even figuring in competition for energy rights in countries as far ranging as Iran and Kazakhstan to Argentina is a dampener for economic expansion and a reality check of how far-reaching New Delhi's global ambit is. In 2003 former banker Percy Mistry wrote that economic diplomacy was 'becoming a much more important plank in overall foreign policy than countries like India (and their rigid bureaucratic and ignorant political establishments) have as yet recognised, although countries like China have done so some time ago'.³⁹ That gap in alertness to seizing economic opportunities at the international level with *savoir faire* still persists between India and China and accentuates the latter's lead in striking deals for a flurry of regional/preferential trading agreements and market-opening opportunities for Chinese corporations.⁴⁰

Lovable Asian hulk?

Of the categories of power that add up to the collective national strength of a state, *soft power* has received increasing attention ever since the liberal scholar Joseph Nye invented the concept in 1990. The ability of a state to influence and lead other states through attraction and good will has been central to the hegemony of the USA in the post-Second World War and post-Cold War eras. The belief that the USA and its socio-economic institutions, like Wall Street and Hollywood, worked not only for their own interests but in the general interests of world order by spreading public good like security, free markets and universal entertainment, underpinned US global leadership until the disastrous 'war on terrorism' and the collapse of the financial sector. The noticeable fall in favourability ratings of the USA in international public opinion over the last decade, the decade of President George W. Bush, was a critical factor in ending the unipolar moment since 1991 and taking the world towards *multipolarity*. If the traditional analysis of the waxing and waning of dominant states is overloaded with *hard power* variables like military and economic strength, the media- and opinion-saturated information age is bound to elevate the importance of *soft power* in the overall power calculations for any state.

India began its journey as a self-determining state in 1947 with a *soft power* bang that faded away after its greatest exponent, the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, died in 1964. In the Nehru years, India was a pygmy in *hard power* indices, but a giant in *soft power*, in which Indian foreign policy was global in scope and based on universally appealing concepts such as peaceful co-existence and distributional equity in the world economy. The number of diplomatic forays Nehru made into distant conflicts around the world was dizzying and brought instant liking and recognition for India as a responsible Asian country that was trying to solve global problems.⁴¹ However, a narrowing of India's domain of foreign policy interest due to generational change in political leadership and the harsh realities of war with China and Pakistan reduced the country's *soft power* range and limited it, at best, to the status of a South Asian hegemon. Ironically, even as India practically disappeared as an actor with influence in far-flung regions of the Global South like Africa and Latin America by the turn of the century, it began to improve its *hard power* attributes by logging higher economic growth and military prowess. Counter-factually, if only India's current leadership and strategic elite corps had the global vision of a Nehru, they could work wonders for the country's image and reputation because they sit atop ever-accumulating *hard power* of which Nehru could only dream. The attitudinal change required in India's foreign policy bureaucracy to reorient itself and redefine India's sphere of interest in global rather than regional or continental proportions has not yet occurred, however. The status quo is riddled with an obsession for happenings in the immediate neighbourhood, neglect of political developments in geographically distant parts of the world and

their potential impact on India's fundamental long-term projected foreign policy ambitions. A paucity of endogenous knowledge accumulation in IR theory and application in Indian academia and policy-making has also condemned the strategic discourse in the country to be a mere recipient of new thinking about statecraft from overseas rather than producing its own recognizable brand of action in world politics that could be admired or emulated by others. Unlike China, for instance, which has coined the catchy phrase 'peaceful rise' to portray its own ascent in international power standings and has built a coherent literature and narrative to go with it, India finds itself intellectually handicapped in confecting long-term foreign policy planning mantras that would set it apart as a desirable state the upward mobility of which is mostly welcomed, not feared.

India has bristled in recent years at being depicted as a spoiler state on keystone issues underpinning the international system such as nuclear non-proliferation, climate change and multilateral trade, but an image problem has persisted that India is a country that flouts global norms and acts exclusively for narrow self-interest.⁴² To an extent, India can claim to be victim of a vilification campaign by Western media houses that are unable to digest the ongoing power shift to Asia, but the country's rulers have not given enough thought to branding India's foreign policy and unique domestic social attributes like pluralism, democracy and tolerance to the level that authoritarian China has done through its masterful 'charm offensive'.⁴³ India has not leveraged its core strength, its vast pool of English-speaking mathematics, engineering and medical graduates, to good effect when they could easily spearhead the country's overseas aid missions and earn much-needed international empathy. India's vibrant cultural exports like Bollywood films, yoga, spirituality and the *Kamasutra* definitely count in slowly rebuilding its *soft power* points tally, but there does not appear to be a methodical plan co-ordinating state and civil society to purposefully expand them on a global scale in the way China has managed through its burgeoning Confucius Institutes. Better utilization of the country's finest minds for public relations and diplomacy overseas remains one of the many items in India's overflowing 'to do' list.

Conclusions

In 2003 the nuclear specialist George Perkovich concluded on the basis of an itemized checklist that India, 'must make great strides before it can attain significant power over other states and thus in the international system at large'.⁴⁴ Since that time, the Indian economy has been a flag bearer for the national quest to be accepted as a genuine Great Power. Economic growth remains India's main claim for entry into the hallowed portals of influential states, and this attribute is likely to keep impressing itself on the rest of the world with even bigger voice in decades to come. Should infrastructure revamping and skilling of the population succeed, the sky's the limit for India's entrepreneurial energies, as outlined in former President Abdul Kalam's writings.⁴⁵ Simultaneous enhancements are warranted for India's *soft power*, which can be augmented by harnessing the country's talented sections of the labour force and introducing an element of creativity, flexibility and global vision into foreign policy. India's military has a silver lining, but will have to undergo revolutionary upgrade in capacity and sharpness before becoming a compelling force that advances strategic goals and has systemic impact on international peace and security. The dreadful epithet of a 'soft state' that cannot determine its own security environment and is always at the mercy of external powers is a burdensome one that India has borne shamefacedly without attempting to forcefully shake it off. Movement in a direction where India bends the international system to suit its preferences is still not on the horizon. This is, of course, also dependent on the relative power of other states, but if one

accepts the realist picturization of a self-help world where each state builds its own capacity to the maximum and hopes that its accumulation of power proves sufficient, India has to pull up its socks in the different realms of practice and policy outlined in this essay and there is still some way to go. To recall the historic mission outlined by Kautilya, the ancient Indian advocate of *realpolitik*, 'always endeavour to augment power and elevate happiness'.⁴⁶

Notes

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