

BEST OF

Books & Arts in Review

The Best Books of March**Spring Cookbooks****'Taming the Octopus' and 'The Race to Zero'**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/the-unfinished-quest-review-indias-path-to-global-power-cdaa28a8>

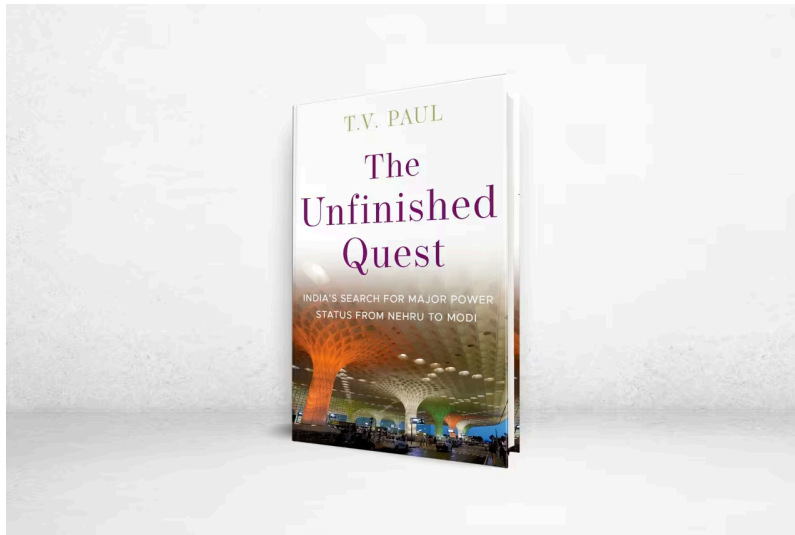
WORLD | **ASIA** | **BOOKSHELF**[Follow](#)

'The Unfinished Quest' Review: India's Path to Global Power

Until recently, India didn't see itself as a great power in the traditional mode. Now it wants to establish a leading role in the world order.

By Brendan Simms

April 29, 2024 12:00 pm ET



Charles de Gaulle once remarked that India would always be a potential great power. It was a two-edged comment, suggesting both the latent strength of India and the idea that it would never be fully realized. This sense of India as a nation forever “becoming” great but never being so has persisted over time. A decade ago, the London-based political scientist Harsh Pant noted that, to many, India was “on the cusp” of achieving “great power status,” though he added that he was himself skeptical, believing the moment to be still some way off.

In “The Unfinished Quest,” T.V. Paul—a professor at McGill University and a widely recognized authority on the Subcontinent and on “rising powers”—takes

up the theme. His own quest to discover India's destiny, as a major power or "merely" an aspiring one, is both instructive and stimulating. It helps that his analysis is leavened, here and there, with vignettes from his travels and from his encounters with major figures, such as Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister from 2004 to 2014.

Much has happened since de Gaulle's era. India has grown to be the fifth largest economy in the world and the fourth highest military spender, recently surpassing the U.K. in both categories. The feeling that India should reconnect with its glorious past—whether the Hindu greatness of ancient times or the greatness of the Muslim Mughal Empire—has intensified. "We must work as one society with one purpose in one direction," Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated, "to regain the rightful position of India in the world order. In the past, our country had that place." Such statements reinforce India's desire—voiced many times over the years—for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

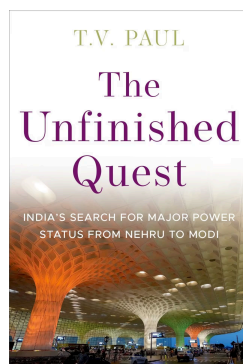
GRAB A COPY

The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi

By T.V. Paul

Oxford University Press

280 pages



If history is a spur to India, it has also been a constraint. As Mr. Paul notes, modern India was twice left behind in the great-power races. First, in 1945 when it was denied a seat alongside the U.S., Britain, France, the Soviet Union and China on the U.N. Security Council even though its claim—based on its contribution to World War II—was roughly equal to China's and much stronger than that of France. Second, in 1968, when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation regime

institutionalized the superiority of the "Permanent Five" and lumped India in with the rest of the world as a country not entitled to develop atomic weaponry. Both exclusions were taken as a slight and grated on national pride.

Even so, India in the postwar years didn't see itself as a great power in the traditional mode. Under its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, the country sought to keep the superpowers at arm's length and to lead the "non-aligned

movement” of decolonized states. Nehru cast aside warnings about the threat that China posed to India. This blithe approach collapsed spectacularly in 1962, when Nehru was still prime minister and the People’s Republic roundly defeated India in a short border war.

Over the following years, India engaged in some careful global repositioning. It kept Pakistan in its place through a series of wars and managed to get the world to stop thinking in terms of “Indo-Pak,” a bracketing that misleadingly put the two countries on the same footing, and to start regarding India as a major actor in its own right. As Mr. Paul shows, India succeeded not merely in “going nuclear” (it tested a nuclear device in 1974) but in persuading the U.S. and other powers to give it an exemption from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation regime.

Mr. Singh told the author that the deal, arrived at officially in 2005, finally released India from the “nuclear apartheid” to which it had been subjected. It was the status issue, Mr. Paul says, more than the power question that propelled India’s nuclear efforts. A more recent “status-elevating moment,” Mr. Paul observes, came on Aug. 23, 2023, when India became “one among only four nations . . . that have accomplished the feat of landing a craft on the Moon.” (Japan has since become the fifth.)

Throughout all this recent history the Soviet Union, then Russia, has proved to be a dependable friend, keeping India supplied with the necessary military hardware. Moscow came through for New Delhi again and again during the Bangladesh War of 1971; the brief exchanges over Kargil (disputed territory in Kashmir) in 1999; and, starting in 2020, the periodic Sino-Indian scuffles and border disputes in the Himalayas.

The problem, as Mr. Paul argues, is that for all the strides India has made, China has made even greater ones, and the gulf appears to be widening. Because of population size and geography, the two countries are often compared and seen to be rivalrous. It is now China, rather than the Western powers, that is withholding the status equality New Delhi so desperately craves. India watches with growing concern as Chinese money, technology and diplomacy penetrate its border states and large swaths of the lands bordering the Indian Ocean. China’s new military bases constitute, for Indians, a “string of pearls” that encircle their country.

Yet the greatest challenge to India's ambitions is internal. Like many other critics before him, Mr. Paul sees India's human-development deficiencies—its poverty and corruption—as a huge handicap. He also sees the increasingly radical Hindu nationalism of the Modi government as a force that risks tearing the country apart at the very moment when it needs to unite. More than that, he suspects that India—given its Gandhian legacy of nonviolence and the widespread popular resistance to taking sides between the big players in a geopolitical conflict—lacks the power instinct necessary to achieve major-power status. All in all, decades after de Gaulle, India as a great power is still, as Mr. Paul writes, a “project in the making.”

Mr. Simms's most recent book is “Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and Germany's March to Global War,” written with Charlie Laderman.

Videos