

Critical Dialogue

The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi. By T.V. Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 280p. £22.99 cloth.
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Over the past decade, Prime Minister Modi's tenure has relentlessly focused on redefining India's material and spiritual significance on the world stage. *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* by T.V. Paul gives us invaluable context to this era of political discourse, providing a meticulously detailed analysis of India's ongoing attempt to establish itself as a major power in the global arena. Spanning several decades of Indian foreign policy, the book examines the aspirations and realities of India's geopolitical rise, offering insights into the factors that have both enabled and constrained its pursuit of great-power status. By emphasizing the interaction between domestic factors—such as economic constraints, political fragmentation, and ideological shifts—and external pressures, Paul provides a holistic view of why India's path to major power status remains incomplete. The key one, he notes, is that India's development model has not paid enough attention to inclusive human development.

Paul organizes *The Unfinished Quest* into a well-structured, chronological narrative, tracing the evolution of India's foreign policy over nearly seven decades. Yet the fundamental through-line is his conceptual mobilization of what he calls India's "status anxiety." Beyond simply an aspirational paradigm, Paul's use of the term refers to histories of psychological, political, and economic imperatives that form India's pre- and post-colonial identity. The countries that India has, over the years, compared itself favorably to has varied over time. In this context, India's more contentious bilateral relationships, such as with China and Pakistan, are manifestations of larger contestations for international recognition. Each chapter is devoted to a distinct period in India's political history, reflecting the changes in leadership and the corresponding shifts in international strategy. Beginning with Nehru's idealistic approach to nonalignment in the Cold War era, Paul carefully analyzes how successive Indian administrations navigated global challenges while maintaining autonomy.

The chronological progression allows Paul to highlight both continuities and divergences in policy, particularly as India transitioned from the more defensive, socialist-driven policies of the Cold War to the economically liberalized, assertive diplomacy seen in the 21st century.

At the core of this analysis lies the tension between India's ambitions and its capabilities. The early post-independence years were characterized by a commitment to nonalignment and a moral high ground in international affairs, an approach that allowed India to avoid entanglement in Cold War geopolitics but limited its ability to forge strategic alliances or assert itself as a major military power. Subsequent Indian administrations, particularly during Indira Gandhi's tenure, embraced a more inward-looking strategy focused on national security, especially in the context of regional conflicts with Pakistan and China. The Indo-Pakistani wars and the Sino-Indian border conflict heightened India's sense of vulnerability, prompting shifts toward military modernization and nuclear deterrence. Yet, these moves were often constrained by economic challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies, preventing India from fully capitalizing on its geopolitical advantages.

The liberalization of the economy in the 1990s under P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh marked a turning point in India's global engagement. Economic reforms paved the way for a more outward-looking foreign policy, with India actively seeking partnerships with global powers and participating in multilateral institutions. However, despite this shift, India's global influence remained limited by its inability to resolve internal challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and political fragmentation. Modi's government has positioned India as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, seeking to counter China's growing influence while building partnerships with Japan, Australia, and ASEAN nations. Nevertheless, this assertiveness has not fully resolved the deeper structural issues—such as bureaucratic inertia and inconsistent policy implementation—that continue to hinder India's rise.

The book places significant emphasis on India's relationships with major global and regional powers, particularly its complex and often adversarial relationship with China. The Sino-Indian rivalry, marked by both military clashes and economic competition, represents one of the most enduring challenges to India's aspirations for global

power status. China's rapid rise has consistently outpaced India's slower trajectory, intensifying strategic anxiety and compelling India to strengthen its defense capabilities while seeking new alliances to balance Chinese influence in Asia. As India and the U.S. have developed closer ties—evident in defense cooperation and diplomatic exchanges—the partnership has evolved into a key pillar of India's global strategy. Yet, this relationship remains complex, with India maintaining its strategic autonomy even as it benefits from U.S. support in countering regional threats.

India's role in multilateral institutions further illustrates its desire for a greater leadership role in global governance. However, Paul crucially suggests that India's participation in these organizations has often been reactive rather than proactive. India has been effective in championing issues such as climate change and sustainable development, but its overall leadership in these forums remains limited by its domestic constraints and a lack of clear strategic direction.

Domestic Constraints on Global Ambitions

A recurring theme in the book is the internal contradictions that have hindered India's rise as a major global power. While India possesses many of the attributes of a great power—large population, military strength, and economic potential—its ability to project influence has been stymied by persistent domestic challenges. These include bureaucratic inefficiency, political instability, and socio-economic inequality, all of which limit the government's capacity to implement long-term strategic goals.

India's complex democratic framework, while a source of national pride, has also contributed to these limitations. The frequent turnover of political leadership, coupled with regional fragmentation, caste and coalition politics, has made it difficult to pursue consistent foreign policy objectives over time. Economic constraints have further complicated India's ambitions, as large segments of the population continue to live in poverty, and efforts to modernize the economy are often uneven. Moreover, the book highlights the tension between India's global aspirations and its domestic policy. The increasing centralization of power under Modi's leadership, for example, has raised concerns about the erosion of democratic norms, potentially undermining India's soft power and its image as the world's largest democracy. As India seeks to balance its international ambitions with domestic challenges, these internal contradictions remain a significant obstacle to achieving major power status.

Contributions

The Unfinished Quest offers a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of India's long-standing pursuit of global power status, emphasizing both its aspirations and the structural challenges that continue to hinder its rise. One of the key

strengths of the book is its thorough historical grounding, which allows Paul to weave a coherent narrative of India's foreign policy development. His attention to detail is evident in his exploration of the motivations behind key policy decisions and the geopolitical contexts in which they were made. By blending historical analysis with international relations theory, Paul provides a robust framework for understanding why India's rise has been slow and uneven.

Moreover, Paul's critique of the gaps in India's foreign policy is both fair and balanced. While acknowledging the country's many achievements—its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, its growing role in international organizations—Paul remains critical of the persistent challenges that have undermined its ambitions. His focus on internal factors, such as the inertia of India's bureaucracy and the persistent and widening economic inequality within the country, adds nuance to the analysis and avoids the pitfall of blaming external forces alone for India's limitations. The book provides a rich theoretical context for understanding the complexities of India's international engagement.

While *The Unfinished Quest* is a highly valuable contribution to the literature on Indian foreign policy, it does have certain limitations. One area where the book could have gone further is in its engagement with the perspectives of India's neighbours, particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh. While Paul discusses India's broader regional strategy and, indeed, focuses an entire chapter on India's shifting relations with its neighbours, there is relatively little attention given to how neighbouring countries perceive India's quest for power beyond hostility. More focus could have been given to India's relations with other rising powers, such as Russia and the EU, to provide a more holistic picture of India's global strategy. Additionally, the book could have expanded its focus on non-state actors and civil society's role in shaping foreign policy. While Paul provides a comprehensive account of state-driven policies, the role of India's private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and the Indian diaspora in promoting India's global aspirations remains underexplored. Given the increasing importance of these actors in global governance, a more extensive analysis of their contributions would have enriched the discussion.

Lastly, Paul's discussion of Modi's foreign policy, while insightful, occasionally lacks critical depth in assessing the long-term impact of Modi's strategies. While Paul acknowledges Modi's success in raising India's global profile, particularly through initiatives such as *Act East* and the strengthening of ties with the United States, his assessment of the risks involved—such as the potential alienation of certain regional powers and the internal erosion of democratic norms—is somewhat limited.

Paul's work revolves around the question he continues to return to: why does India have a desire for global status, and how has this quest, as such, seen failures and successes

over the last century? An incisive follow-up he asks in Chapter 2 is, “Is the notion of ‘great power’ an outdated European-era concept?” (Paul 33). Indeed, India’s ongoing fight for global status assumes a legitimate, if ever-shifting, global hierarchy: one determined by military aggression, conquest (whether soft or hard), and resource dominance, rather than mutual accountability, interdependence, and cooperation. While the book consistently deconstructs the terms through which the discipline more specifically, and geopolitical discourse more generally, understands global power, we must collectively reckon with new categories of analysis that prioritise international community and responsibility for the future, particularly as we tackle imminent and catastrophic shared global challenges.

**Response to Anuradha Sajjanhar’s Review of
*The Unfinished Quest: India’s Search for Major
Power Status from Nehru to Modi***

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— T.V. Paul 

The review by Anuradha Sajjanhar offers a succinct evaluation of the core arguments in my book. I am gratified that she finds the central arguments in the book compelling. She notes that the book presents a good account of the opportunities and constraints that India has faced, both internally and externally, to obtain its goal of a major power status in international politics since independence. She also notes the high quality of the work in terms of writing and argumentation. For me, the motivation for writing this book came from a realization that theories on status are much advanced in the international relations discipline today and yet there have been scant attempts to apply these theoretical insights on the Indian case. The review probably could have benefitted from an appreciation of this motivation in terms of applying status theories adequately as her main focus is on the India-centric aspects of the book. Many comparative elements of previous rising powers are discussed in this context. In fact, a criticism I raise in my review of her well-written work relates to the avoidance of discussing international aspirations of the Hindutva movement.

The criticism she makes that the book should have gone deeper into the public perceptions in key countries, especially in the neighborhood, is fairly valid. However, this would have required gaining access to public opinion data from these countries on this subject which seems nonexistent or not reliable. The elite-level strategies to balance India in both power and status terms received more focus in the book, especially in the context of the arrival of China as a serious contender to India’s dominance of South Asia and today New Delhi has to compete with Beijing in the region. Further, the smaller neighbors have acquired enough agency to bargain with both China and India for

much economic aid. The domestic politics of these countries are also shaped by this contestation as political parties compete on the basis of their pro-China or pro-India positions for electoral advantages. Pakistan is an exception to this as it mounted the most consequential status challenge to India from their joint birth in 1947, although in recent years it has found itself in a less favorable position. The borrowing of status and power through alignment with the US and China helped in this process. The book addresses status contestation as a key variable in explaining India-China and India-Pakistan rivalries, an aspect that is missing in the extant literature on these subjects. The main constraint in adding more analysis is page length as I wanted a tighter and shorter book to attract readership beyond the academy.

I also believe that the book does an adequate job in addressing the challenges facing Modi’s foreign policy, especially in terms of the democratic backsliding under his rule, which has affected the legitimization of India’s status globally, especially in the liberal world as exclusivist religious nationalism has few takers as an emulative approach to state building. In an era of right-wing populism, especially in the West, some level of elite level acceptance of India has been occurring. This is largely due to India’s swing power position in the context of China’s rise and the potential to act as a possible counterweight to Chinese economic strength. I also discuss the limitations of diaspora politics as both facilitators and inhibitors to India’s status enhancement. The book concludes by arguing that India needs to offer better conceptions of world order and ideas for tackling collective global challenges rather than engage in the veto-payer role it often takes on crucial negotiations on climate change or trade liberalization.

The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic

Promises in Modi’s India. By Anuradha Sajjanhar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 189p. \$105.00 cloth, \$34.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592724002482

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This book is one of the rare works that deals with the ideational, intellectual, and technocratic bases of the Hindutva movement and the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)’s success in obtaining political power in India. The book argues that populist movements and political parties such as the BJP use particular intellectual groups, think tanks, and opinion makers to embellish their views of a nation state that they want to create in their countries, as in India’s case. This strategy has allowed the party to gain substantial followership after being on the margins of Indian politics for decades. Populism, like any dynamic