

## Book Review

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T. V. Paul, *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2024; ISBN 9780197669990 (hardback), price \$29.99, 280 pp.

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T. V. Paul of McGill University, one of the leading scholars of India's international relations, analyses India's quest for major power status from independence to the present, from the leadership of Nehru to that of Modi, in this historically, theoretically and empirically rich book. He uses the term 'major power' instead of 'great power', a standard in the literature, and 'global power' rather than 'superpower' for the United States. India's rise since the early 1990s is well-known. Its rising status is captured from being the 16th largest economy in 1993 to the fifth largest by 2022, its nuclear tests of 1998 with its nuclear weapon power status legitimized by the global power United States in the 2005–08 civil nuclear agreement, its growing defence cooperation with the United States both bilaterally and multilaterally, and its presidency of the Group of 20 (G-20) in 2023. During the past three decades its search for status that began since independence accelerated.

But what is status in international relations and why do states seek it? Status can be viewed as the collective beliefs about a state's ranking on valued attributes such as wealth, military strength, diplomatic clout, demographic position and socio-political organization. Status needs external acknowledgement, especially by peers. States seek status as it can bring benefits such as special rights or leverage. This is particularly so if status enables membership of exclusive clubs like permanent membership of the UN Security Council or being one of the few states that possess nuclear weapons. Status can bring a material advantage. Paul cites Gilpin in saying that prestige, over actual power, is the daily currency of international relations. Status in international affairs can also boost domestic legitimacy and power for leaders, governments and ruling parties.

What are the ingredients of status? While military power has historically been considered the key ingredient, Paul updates status theorizing by outlining ten key elements that make for a comprehensive national power capability – the four main ones being military, economic, technological/knowledge and demographic attributes, the other six being the state's normative position, its leadership role in international institutions, its cultural attributes, its state capacity, and effective national leadership.

Paul gives a detailed historical account of India's quest for status from Nehru onward. He analyses hard power – military strength, economic growth, scientific-technological and demographic attributes – and soft power factors such as culture, communication and democracy, in India's power composition and status-seeking diplomacy. He situates these in India's relations with the global and major powers, and with India's neighbours, over time and changing governments/leaders.

Nehru, 1947–64, used India's soft power resources of the time to punch above its weight in promoting decolonization, anti-racism and nonalignment. These included its moral standing due to its successful non-violent independence movement, its civilisational heritage and its democratic credentials. However, it should be noted that the foundations for hard power were also quietly laid by Nehru in the form of a dual-purpose atomic energy programme from 1948, a space launch programme from 1962, and a heavy industrialization programme as well as a network of scientific and technological institutions. The India-China War of 1962 was a huge setback in India's perceived status.

Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984, continued the nuclear and space programmes, won a major victory over Pakistan in 1971, conducted a one-off nuclear test in 1974, and launched a missile programme in 1983 while refusing to sign the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty to keep its nuclear option open. India's rise in status was constrained from 1962 to the early 1990s due to slow economic growth and challenging relations with the United States that leaned towards Pakistan from 1954, and especially from 1971 due to Pakistan's usefulness in the Cold War. In addition, Pakistan opening up to China, and facilitating guerilla warfare against the Soviets in Afghanistan and the emergence of a tacit US-China understanding in the 1980s led to a closer India-Soviet relationship.

These irritants in the US-India relationship were gradually resolved in the post-Cold War period with the breakup of the Soviet Union, India's high economic growth, nuclear tests in 1998, and the perceived common threat from a rising China. The 2005-08 Indo-US nuclear deal led to a status boost in the form of acceptance as a *de facto* nuclear weapons power, followed by its emergence as a swing state in the Indo-Pacific security order alongside its emergence as the fifth largest economy.

Paul concludes that soft power alone does not work for status elevation but a combination of hard and soft power. India's power projection capability and thus its rise is hampered by its two-front land border military standoff with two nuclear neighbours. It is also constrained by continuing relative poverty and low human development of large sections of its population. Also, there has been perceived democratic backsliding and mistreatment of minorities although there has been no serious pushback by Western democracies or by Islamic states on these matters. These are also likely to be low priorities for the second Trump administration with a nativist and nationalist agenda.

In conclusion, Paul's observation that it is difficult to isolate status as an objective in analyzing foreign policy since it is intertwined with security, economic and other objectives is spot on. An enhancement of military, economic and technological/scientific power will also boost status. However, whether such policy thrusts are exclusively status-motivated is difficult to argue because there can be multiple goals that include status enhancement. It is only when membership of select clubs is explicitly sought, such as reform of and entry to the UN Security Council, that policy can be said to be exclusively status-motivated.