

India: Slouching toward superpowerdom?

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Responding to a recent LSE IDEAS report, “India: The Next Superpower?”, Michael Kugelman argues that India has the resources to be powerful, but lacks the ability to manage and deploy them.

The last few months have not been kind to Shining India.

First an [LSE report](#) suggested India cannot, and should not, become a superpower because of (among other things) its immense societal challenges. Then a western investor, speaking of India’s recent economic troubles, [told](#) the *Financial Times* that the country “is close to becoming the Greece of Asia.” And now an [article](#) in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* argues that a fractured, corrupt and out-of-touch political culture is keeping India down.



These assessments amplify what we already know: India’s society, economy, and politics are troubled. We’ve all heard how the country suffers from [more gender inequality than Pakistan](#); how there is [more poverty in eight Indian states than in all of sub-Saharan Africa](#); and how [nearly a quarter of Parliament has been charged with committing at least one crime](#).

Does all this underscore India’s deep domestic distress? Absolutely. Yet does it also mean India’s quest for superpower status will fall short? Not necessarily. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the Berlin Wall crumbled and the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States’ superpower status was crystal clear—yet during that same period, America was ravaged by racial tensions, rising homelessness, a crack cocaine epidemic, and the spread of AIDS. Many if not all superpowers have problems at home.

Brute strength, however, is never a problem. Traditionally, the term “superpower” is code for military clout—hard, hulking, herculean power that can take out external enemies and protect weaker allies. This is the standard by which superpower potential should be judged. And on this count, India has a long way to go.

I say this not because India lacks the resources to be powerful, but because it lacks the ability to manage and deploy them.

India undoubtedly has power. As Iskander Rehman notes in his [portion](#) of the LSE IDEAS report, the nuclear-armed nation is the world's largest weapons importer and its military constitutes the world's third-largest volunteer force.

However, New Delhi gives little indication that it has an actual strategy for marshaling these resources and using them in the most efficient manner. This reflects a constraint that many Indians—including those in the security establishment—openly admit: a lack of strategic planning. Arun Prakash, a former naval chief of staff, [laments](#) how “every military operation since independence has been guided more by political rhetoric than strategic direction.”

The story of Prakash's former employer is a case in point. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that [many of India's chief security concerns now emanate from the sea](#). These include terrorism (recall that [the 2008 Mumbai attackers arrived via the city's port](#)), [Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean Region](#) (from port and infrastructure development off Pakistan and Myanmar to natural resource acquisitions in the Bay of Bengal), and the volatile neighbourhoods housing India's sea-based energy holdings (think of those offshore assets in the Persian Gulf, and remember that [about two-thirds of India's oil consumption comes from overseas](#)).

A fledgling superpower must ensure that it has the means to address such concerns. Yet the institution charged with sea-based contingencies, the Indian Navy, receives the smallest share of the military budget, and, with just 55,000 personnel, is [dramatically outsized by the million-person-strong army](#). Such disparities were justifiable in past decades, when India's chief security concerns (notably border tensions with Pakistan and China) were land-based. But today is a different story.

India, Rehman [explains](#), suffers not only from a shortage of strategy, but also from institutional weaknesses—from dismal civil-military relations to a lack of cooperation among the three military branches. India, he concludes, must undertake “a transformational overhaul of its institutions and procedures” in order to become a truly global power.

Reading that line, I was reminded of something that noted security specialist Brahma Chellaney once wrote about India's political corruption. Chellaney, hardly a revolutionary, nonetheless [warned](#) that “it may take a second war of independence for India to gain true freedom from exploitation and pillage.”

Transformation. Revolution. This represents much more than mere reforms or course corrections. With such drastic measures required to tackle deeply ingrained obstacles, it is folly to assume India can become a superpower any time soon. The nation's structural deficiencies preclude its ability not only to properly utilise military resources, but also to demonstrate [the most elementary forms of good governance](#).

Still, even without superpower status, India is no slouch; it's doing quite well managing its place in today's unipolar world order. As befitting a founder of the non-aligned movement, New Delhi enjoys good relations with a range of states, from democracies such as [America](#) and hybrids like [Russia](#) to pariahs such as [Iran](#). India is also active in the major new multilateral groupings, such as [BRICs](#). Finally, India's image abroad is [relatively positive](#) (notwithstanding in several countries on the Subcontinent, [where hostile sentiment is often rife](#)).

This raises the question of whether New Delhi truly wants to be a superpower, at least in the traditional (and western) sense of a power-projecting juggernaut. Given all the talk of India's military modernisation and weapons acquisitions, it's important to point out that such activities are motivated as much by a need to keep pace with China as by a desire to become a global power. The army has [stated](#) that its recent major upgrade in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir (which borders the China-administered Aksai Chin area of eastern Kashmir) was part of a “vision” to catch up to Chinese capabilities. And a top defense official has [admitted](#) that a chief maritime priority for India is to respond to China's “aggressive modernisation plans.”

Would India be as intent on burnishing its great-power credentials in the absence of a rising China? Most certainly—yet with considerably less urgency.

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