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How India Became a Rising Power

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American boosterism for India since the early 2000s played a crucial role in according the country status as a Rising Power. India must recognise that the US narrative is not always objective but shaped by its ideological, geopolitical, and commercial agendas which shift with American priorities.

Since the turn of the century, the assertion that India is on its way to becoming a great power has become a cliché. The media is saturated with triumphalist narratives of India's growing influence and status in the world. A vast majority of policymakers, academics, and analysts across the globe use the terms 'rising power' or 'emerging nation' to describe it. The claim has wide policy implications, especially in a world anticipating major shifts in the balance of power in the coming decades.

Yet, for a term engaged in such widespread conceptual heavy lifting, the origins and meaning of 'rising power' are not well understood.

Scholars of international relations do not have a standard measure to determine if a country is a rising power – that is, one accumulating material capabilities at a pace to close the gap with the existing great powers (Chestnut and Jonston 2009). While India's economic and military growth in the last three decades is indisputable, it is difficult to say if it is growing fast enough to catch up with the great powers. For instance, between 2009 and 2019, India's gross domestic product (GDP) as a percentage of the United States' GDP only grew to 13% from 9%. During the same period, the economic gap between India and China actually widened. India's GDP as a percentage of China's GDP fell to 20% from 26%. This is not surprising given that India has managed an average annual GDP growth rate of 6.2% since 1991, while China has grown at 9% since its economic reforms in 1978.¹

The point here is not to litigate whether India is rising but that we lack an objective yardstick to declare it as 'rising'. To call a country a Rising Power is a subjective assessment based on a narrative of its past performance and future expectations. While the narrative has to be grounded in reality – claiming a country with, say, negative growth rate is 'rising' would be farcical – like all narratives, it is shaped by the embedded ideological worldviews and material interests of those telling it.

The narrative of rising India was not constructed by New Delhi alone. India could not self-proclaim its Rising Power status; that had to be validated by the international community. In particular, it needed endorsement of the global hegemon. The US is not just the dominant great power; it is also the centre of global discourse on international politics. Ideas circulating in Washington have tremendous influence across the world. To understand how India came to be known as a Rising Power, we have to examine how the US came to accept and champion this narrative.

India in American grand strategy

India has always been a strategically prominent nation, thanks to its geographic location and enormous population. It maintains a huge military and acquired latent nuclear capability in 1974. It has boasted one of the 15 largest economies in the world since the 1970s, which began to show signs of quickening development even before the 1991 reforms. Between 1985 and 1990, it posted a respectable growth rate of 5.85%. Yet, these factors never converged in a way to produce a sustained narrative of India rising.

The end of the Cold War shoved South Asia to the margins of global geopolitics, bringing India's significance in American thinking to its nadir in the 1990s. Two watershed developments of the decade – the 1991 economic liberalisation and the 1998 nuclear tests – did not force an immediate reassessment of India's global image. Until its last days, the Bill Clinton administration mostly kept nuclear proliferation and India-Pakistan tensions as the **focus** of its South Asia policy, making little room for the idea of India as a potential great power.

The shift came when the neoconservative ideology was swept into power with the George W. Bush administration in 2001. The 'neocons' who populated Bush's foreign policy team wanted to revise Washington's approach to India because of two factors: China and the importance the US gave to democracy.

One of the central tenets of the neoconservative ideology was that the global American hegemony, achieved after the fall of the Soviet Union, was of immense value to both the US and the world. Accordingly, the primary goal of the American grand strategy had to be

to preserve its preeminence by forestalling the rise of any great power rival. China, with its booming economy, became a central concern for the neocons by the late 1990s. Whereas the Clinton administration sought a friendly relationship with Beijing, hoping that economic liberalisation would induce political reforms in China, the neocons believed that Sino-US competition for the control of the international system was inevitable as Chinese power grew.

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The right-wing foreign policy intelligentsia in Washington began to see India as a potential counterweight to China even before Bush was sworn into office. Conservative think tanks including [Cato Institute](#), [Heritage Foundation](#), and [Hoover Institution](#), urged an India policy reset.

In a telling 2002 Hoover Institution report, Lloyd Richardson, a Ronald Reagan-era State Department official, argued that the US should aid India's rise to power because “a strong India raises the price of China's military build-up and expansionist policies in Asia.” Referring to the US opening to China in the 1970s to put pressure on the Soviet Union, Richardson held that “India now finds itself vis-à-vis China in the same posture China was with respect to Russia 30 years ago.” The 2000 Cato Institute report pointed out that since India was not an American ally, its rise as a ballast to China would be less costly and create less exposure to the US than if Washington were to build up, say, Japan against China.

India's democracy made it all the more attractive to the neocons who believed the spread of democracy around the world was inherently in American strategic interest. To them, India not only appeared as a “natural partner” but also a poster child of democracy to the Global South. “[A] strong India would [...] send the message that democracy in a developing country is not incompatible with rapid growth and wealth,” Richardson wrote.

These ideas percolated to Bush's foreign policy team and became the basis for the administration's policy to invest in India's ascendancy, even if it eschewed a formal alliance with the US (Tellis and Mohan 2015: 29-30). The policy was built on a two-way logic. The Bush administration saw India as a rising power, and therefore sought to position it as a counterweight to China. At the same time, the Bush administration saw India as a rising power because it needed such a power in Asia to counterbalance China. It served Washington's strategic and ideological interests to be bullish on India. US officials also believed that according greater respect to a status-hungry New Delhi was an easy way to score points with it.

Remarkably, the new policy gained momentum in Washington at a time when India's rise appeared to be stumbling. The 1999 Kargil War and the 2001–02 India-Pakistan stand-off suggested that New Delhi was still too mired in the morass of subcontinental rivalry to play a global role. Between 1997 and 2003, the Indian economy slowed down to 5.2%, from 6.75% of the previous five years, according to the *Economic Survey*.

The Tenth Five-Year Plan, published in 2002, reflected a sober mood. While targeting 8% growth, the planners expressed concerns that that India's “demonstrated growth potential is only about 6.5%” after a decade of reforms (2002: 6). Shankar Acharya, a former Chief Economic Adviser to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, predicted in 2004 that Indian growth would hover around 5.5% to 6% in the medium term. The World Bank was even bleaker when it projected in 2003 that India was likely to grow only at 5% over the next five years (2003: 79). The case for rising India did not appear at its strongest in the early 2000s.

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Nevertheless, the Bush administration vigorously pursued a new India policy, with the 2005 Indo-US nuclear deal as its centrepiece. While it is often claimed that the deal was first proposed by Indian officials, the idea was circulating in neocon circles long before. The Cato Institute had suggested several policy options for Washington to recognise “India's world power status,” the most radical of which was for the US “to unconditionally accept India's nuclear status” (Gobarev 2000: 20-22). The Bush administration gave India more than it had asked for by recognising it as a de facto nuclear power. It also lobbied the international nuclear institutions – the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) – to accept India as a nuclear state, which amounted to a multilateral recognition of India's rising status.

The Bush White House congratulated itself after the nuclear deal by declaring in 2006 that “India now is poised to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States in a way befitting a major power” (US National Security Strategy 2006: 39). Indeed,

the administration had elevated India's formal status in the world by tweaking the international rules in New Delhi's favour. Just as significantly, it encouraged a consensus in Washington around the narrative of India as a Rising Power.

New Washington consensus

In the 1990s, the mainstream foreign policy discourse in Washington had considered India marginal to global geopolitics, mirroring the attitude of the Clinton White House. India was “neither rich enough to bribe, powerful enough to bully, nor principled enough to inspire” other states, [declared](#) a 1997 article in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine. The rare cautiously optimistic predictions about India's rise were largely ignored (Gordon 1995).

With the arrival of the Bush administration, a new outlook towards India began to permeate into mainstream think tanks, Wall Street, and even popular media. The American presidency always comes with a powerful bully pulpit to set the tone of the conversation in Washington. During his first term, President Bush was particularly influential in setting the terms of the American foreign policy discourse.

Stephen Cohen, a South Asia expert then recently appointed at the Brookings Institution, wrote one of the early major works to declare India a Rising Power. Published in 2001, *India: Emerging Power* was a careful assessment of India's growing economic, nuclear, and cultural clout. It concluded by exhorting US policymakers to seek closer relations with India. The book was an instant hit and remains a heavily cited text among foreign policy experts. Notably, Cohen had been writing about India as an emerging power for decades, without garnering much attention in Washington (Cohen and Park 1979; Cohen 1991). In 2001, the city proved much more receptive. It seemed to be a case of message meeting the moment.

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A flurry of writings followed with some variation of the title *India as an Emerging Power*, many written by major Indian foreign policy experts based in the West, including Sumit Ganguly (2003), Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul (2003), Ashley Tellis (2005), and Prasenjit Basu, Brahma Chellaney, Parag Khanna, and Sunil Khilnani (2005). These works were thoughtful and nuanced, many based on research which preceded the Bush administration, but their train-like appearance reinforced the headline that India was a Rising Power. Much of the writing was directed towards American policymakers, making a case for closer India-US relationship. Some analysts challenged the narrative of rising India, but their voices found little space in the discourse (Perkovich 2003).

Wall Street also joined the fray with the publication of Goldman Sachs reports on BRICs, which argued that Brazil, India, Russia, and China should be offered a greater say in global economic governance as rapidly emerging economies. While the [original 2001 report](#) considered India's growth prospects the least impressive of the four, the [2003 follow-up report](#) predicted that India would grow the fastest over the next 30 to 50 years. The report's back-of-the-envelope half-century projections were highly speculative (it expected Indian GDP to be \$5.44 trillion in 2025; it is currently \$3.88 trillion). Nevertheless, the report became a foundational pillar of the steadily inflating narrative of India Rising.

American boosterism for India became pervasive. In a 2002 episode of the classic political TV drama *The West Wing*, the fictional US President Jed Bartlet declared that he would rather that American investment went to India than to China because Indians were democratic, English-speaking, and respected the rule of law. In 2004, *Foreign Policy* magazine and the *New York Times* predicted that Indian economic growth could overtake China. The columnist [Thomas Friedman suggested](#) that India should replace France on the United Nations Security Council. US-based management guru [C.K. Prahalad said](#) the country had the potential to grow at 10% to 15%. A new consensus over India in the American mainstream had solidified by the mid-2000s.

Debate in India

The hype around India's rise was growing in Washington at a time when a more contentious debate over the issue was unfolding in New Delhi. The question gained political salience in the early 2000s because the ruling BJP-led government of the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) staked a claim to it. “If someone were to ask me of our biggest accomplishment in the last five years, I would say that today every Indian thinks that he can stand somewhat taller than before,” Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani declared in Parliament (*Lok Sabha Debates*, 18 August 2003). Since most of the BJP's tenure had witnessed anaemic GDP growth rate and

geopolitical crises, government supporters pointed to other factors such as swelling forex reserves, a rising stock market, and a fresh peace process with Pakistan. During the 2004 elections, BJP launched the India Shining campaign to persuade voters of the country's rising economic prosperity and enhanced global reputation.

BJP's claims drew strong pushback from the [political opposition](#) and [media commentators](#). For every rosy projection by the government, they pointed to a poor indicator, including a low employment rate, growing fiscal deficit, low per-capita GDP, abysmal human development indices, and elevated communal tensions. Much of their critique emerged from the fundamental contradiction of India's rising power aspirations: while the country could boast of a large economy and enormous military power in aggregate, it was also mired in immense poverty and intractable social problems. The gargantuan internal challenges of India were – and remain to this day – a foil to the narrative of its external power.

The BJP was ousted from power in 2004, which was widely viewed as an electoral repudiation of its claim of 'India Shining'. But the narrative of rising India outlasted the BJP government and solidified in the mid-2000s as the Indian economy began to hum unexpectedly. It grew at more than 8% between 2003–04 and 2010–11 before slowing down again, according to *Economic Survey*. Further, the new Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government embraced the task of building Brand India with even greater gusto (Ravinder Kaur 2020). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh [dubbed](#) India “the next global superpower” in 2006.

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Notably, New Delhi's narrative of rising India differed from Washington's version in three key ways. First, it was not linked with China. New Delhi did not particularly see itself as a challenger or competitor to Beijing. Second, the Indian narrative was focused on economic growth rather than military power or diplomatic influence. Finally, India was largely uninterested in using its Rising Power status to assume a greater role in managing the international order, belying the expectations of the Bush White House. The only key piece of business India pursued on this front was lobbying for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which was an old *idée fixe* of the Indian government.

In recent years, the gap between American and Indian versions of the story of India's emergence has narrowed because of several factors. The Indian government – under both BJP and Congress – has proved eager to leverage American boosterism for its own political, diplomatic, and economic purposes. American think tanks and US-trained experts have become a bigger voice in the Indian mainstream discourse. Indian media has increasingly relied on American pronouncements as validation for the country's success. In the 2000s, New Delhi and Washington sharply diverged in their imagination of India as a Rising Power. Today, the American vision of Indian power is gaining increasing salience in the Indian discourse.

Implications of American boosterism

Undoubtedly, India's economy, military power, and diplomatic influence has rapidly expanded over the last few decades. But it acquired the Rising Power moniker at a particular time and within a particular context. The early 2000s American boosterism that helped crystallise the narrative of rising India also left it with two specific legacies.

First, India's role as a Rising Power today is inextricably linked to its role as a counterweight to China in the foreign affairs discourse. Western commentary often [presents](#) India as locked in a zero-sum game with its northern neighbour, either as an economic competitor or a geopolitical rival. India is chided for not acting as a 'responsible power' for inadequately confronting China or failing to align itself more closely with the US. The central premise of the neoconservative thesis that India's rise will inevitably lead to a confrontation with China still holds considerable [sway](#) in Washington. Although Sino-Indian relations are marred by some thorny issues, permanent antagonism between the two is not inevitable, despite what the narrative insists.

Second, a case can be made that India was declared a Rising Power too early. After all, in the early 2000s, the Indian economy was still relatively small and [faced](#) seemingly insuperable hurdles. Shyam Saran, India's foreign secretary who negotiated the Indo-US nuclear deal, [called](#) India a “premature power” in 2010, pointing to the challenges it faced in its own neighbourhood.

Historically, the international community tends to recognise a Rising Power belatedly and begrudgingly. Imperial Japan had to defeat Russia in 1905 before it could be considered an 'equal' to the European powers. In contrast, India breezed through the recognition process, boosted by the Bush administration. Consequently, India remains what Manjari Chatterjee Miller calls a “reticent

power”—pursuing greater material power but uninterested in acquiring global authority or external recognition (2021).

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In other words, because India acquired the prestige of a Rising Power early and relatively easily, it has little incentive to undertake major diplomatic or military projects to enhance its international status. Contrastingly, China and Russia, desperate to garner international prestige (positive or negative), have launched ambitious international projects in the recent years. Beijing is trying to position itself as the alternative source of economic development assistance to the Global South through its multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative. Moscow has invaded Ukraine in pursuit of the dream of greater Russia.

American boosterism is valuable to India. Indeed, New Delhi’s claim to Rising Power status would carry little weight in the world without endorsement from Washington. However, it is also important to recognise that the US narrative of India’s rise is informed by its own ideological, geopolitical, or commercial interests. Its volume and shape changes as American priorities change. For instance, in the latter half of the Barak Obama years, Washington became less bullish on India as relations between the two countries cooled. Similarly, in the last years of the Joe Biden presidency, rosy predictions of India’s future as a great power intensified as Sino-US tensions heightened. Now that the Donald Trump White House is turning US foreign policy more capricious and self-centered, the narrative of India’s rise is likely to be affected in unpredictable ways.

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Footnotes:

1 All GDP and GDP growth figures are calculated from World Bank data, unless otherwise indicated.

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