Is India Ready for Prime Time?

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David M. Malone
*Does the Elephant Dance?*  
*Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*  
432 pp.

Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta
*Arming without Aiming: India’s Military Modernization*  
223 pp.
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India’s rapid ascent to the front rank of world powers abounds with paradox. The country’s economic accomplishments, driven by a modern entrepreneurial class, garner superlatives, even as doubts multiply about whether the state’s administrative machinery is able to mobilize the country’s latent resources in a purposive direction. In the defense realm, India is now the world’s leading arms importer, and its military budgets have grown handsomely in recent years. Yet its national security decisionmaking institutions are widely thought to be antiquated, if not outright dysfunctional. While leaders in New Delhi proclaim the dawning of the “Indian century,” others question whether India possesses a grand strategy worthy of the name—or even a geopolitical tradition capable of formulating one. Others puzzle over how the country can aspire to a role at the center stage of global politics—symbolized by its quest for permanent membership in the UN Security Council—and yet remain largely reactive to events in its immediate neighborhood. President Barack Obama speaks of an India that has now “emerged” as a world power, while Lawrence H. Summers touts the superiority of India’s developmental model, dubbing it the “Mumbai consensus.” Yet vast swaths of the Indian population remain mired in abject poverty, and much of the nation’s human capital potential is abraded by widespread child malnutrition and chronic inadequacies in the educational sector.

Two new books approach India’s great-power prospects in different ways. The first is Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy—a broad-ranging but substantive survey of the Indian foreign policy horizon by David M. Malone, a scholar-diplomat most widely known for his expertise

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2 See, for example, the discussion in George K. Tanham, Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretative Essay (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1992); and Kanti P. Bajpai and Amitabh Mattoo, Securing India: Strategic Thought and Practice (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996).
3 Lawrence H. Summers, “India and the Global Economy” (remarks before the Asia Society, Mumbai, October 15, 2010).
in the areas of multilateral diplomacy and public international law. Though much of his knowledge of India comes from his recent stint as Canada’s ambassador in New Delhi, he nonetheless brings an illuminating perspective to the conduct of India’s international relations. Malone covers a wide tableau, starting with the historical, political, and economic drivers that shape New Delhi’s foreign policy behavior, and then moving on to specific examinations of its diplomatic engagement with various parts of the world. Each chapter features concisely written historical summaries peppered with incisive observations. An admiration and affection for India pervades the volume—he concludes the book by noting that “twenty or thirty years from now, the tentative, contingent nature of many of my judgements today may well seem over-cautious” (p. 303)—but this does not prevent him from dispensing pithy opinions on the pathologies affecting Indian diplomacy or from warning that economic growth by itself will not, as many Indians assume, be a pathway to great-power status. Overall, the volume is one of the best overviews of Indian foreign policy in recent years.

In the minds of grand strategists, policy pundits, and business analysts, China and India are now firmly conjoined as Asia’s twin titans, whose spectacular, nearly simultaneous economic rise is propelling an epochal and immutable realignment of global wealth and power. Yet part of the value of Malone’s book is its discussion of the rather sui generis encumbrances that weigh down India’s power trajectory—constraints that sharply distinguish it from its BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) siblings. These start with India’s domestic political fragmentation, an outgrowth of the country’s extreme heterogeneity, which in turn causes external policy to be largely inert in nature and bereft “of the kind of strategic vision required for India to achieve great power status” (p. 72). Mind-boggling ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social diversity of a type no other large country confronts has also brought significant internal security challenges, including the uprising in Kashmir that has been a bleeding wound for the past quarter century, the roughly 30 armed separatist groups operating in the country’s northeastern region, and the resurgent Maoist Naxalite rebellion that afflicts large sections of rural India and is now seeping into urban areas. By themselves, these conflicts may not be enough to hinder India’s rise, though they do sap national resources

5 A similar note is struck by Jaswant Singh, a former Indian defense and foreign minister. See Jaswant Singh, Defending India (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

6 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has taken to calling the Naxalite guerrilla war India’s most serious security challenge. Home Minister P. Chidambaram terms the uprising “an even greater threat” than that posed by Pakistan-based militants. Quoted in Jeremy Page, “India Sets Target of Three Years to Eliminate Threat from Maoists,” Times (London), March 12, 2010.
(including the armed forces) and divert the attention of those Indian leaders who prefer to look to the global arena.

No big country is much loved by those next door, but, as Malone reminds us, India also has the misfortune of residing in a highly volatile neighborhood, surrounded by weak, unstable, and often hostile countries that perennially top various failed-states indices. The problematic regional environment clearly frustrates India’s global power ambitions and leaves New Delhi a less than “fully convincing hegemon within its own subregion” (p. 102). Nonetheless, as Malone makes clear, India has not devoted much energy and creativity toward tending its relations with its “near abroad.” Despite the common civilizational and historical links that permeate South Asia, India has been unable to integrate the area in the same way that China has economically stitched together the much more culturally diverse and geographically disperse East Asian region. In the last few years, New Delhi’s economic diplomacy has been firing on all cylinders in East Asia, penning trade and commercial deals with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the ten-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But the level of activity of India’s “look east” policy is in stark contrast with the country’s lackluster record of leadership in its own backyard. Efforts at promoting cross-border economic cooperation via the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—a forum largely created by New Delhi—remain feeble, for example.

As Malone rightly observes, the challenge for Indian statecraft lies in convincing its neighbors that the country is an opportunity and not a threat. He credits New Delhi with replacing the past condescension and brusqueness it regularly displayed toward neighbors with a gentler and more thoughtful approach, though he notes that this still does not amount to much of a regional strategy. Unless India becomes more inclined toward imaginative and generous management of subcontinental links, he warns that it is unlikely to develop into more than a regional power. A dedicated effort aimed at easing the near-impenetrable trade barriers erected in the wake of the 1947 partition of the British Raj would, Malone suggests, produce significant economic (and eventually security) dividends. Given the energy deficits in much of South Asia, one creative initiative he advances is building under New Delhi’s

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7 For a good examination of the internal fragilities affecting countries in South Asia and their impact on regional security dynamics, see T.V. Paul, South Asia’s Weak States: Understanding the Regional Insecurity Predicament (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

8 For a sense of the economic quasi-blockade that currently exists between India and Pakistan, see Karin Brulliard, “India and Pakistan Are United by Language and Culture, Divided by Commerce,” Washington Post, February 19, 2011.
leadership a regional energy grid that utilizes the ample hydropower resources found in Nepal and the Indian northeast.

Despite New Delhi’s long-standing objective of shutting extraregional powers out of South Asia’s affairs, India has nonetheless delegated much of the management of the nodus of Pakistan to the United States. As Malone sees it, “India cannot aspire to be a truly convincing ‘great power’ until it achieves a better handle on its region without the support and active involvement of outsiders” (p. 128). In his view, leaders in New Delhi will need to surmount the objections raised by a risk-averse security establishment and take the first steps in arranging a lasting détente with their vexatious neighbor. The relaxation of oppressive security controls in Kashmir, he advises, might be just the sort of bold unilateral action that jolts Pakistan into reciprocal action or at least enables India to reclaim international opinion on the issue.

Malone writes perceptively regarding India’s efficacy in capitalizing on two of the putative assets it brings to the great-power contest: a record of multilateral leadership and soft-power strengths. Despite the Nehruvian tradition of global solidarity and emphasis on international organizations, he finds that New Delhi has been most effective in pragmatically cultivating friends and garnering influence in bilateral settings, while in multilateral forums it often seems more concerned with striking needlessly pugnacious and often counterproductive poses. Indeed, the book’s title is an allusion to the question of whether India can become more adept at international partnering. If it cannot, Malone avers, New Delhi increasingly runs the risk of being branded an obstructionist, as happened in the recent breakdown of the Doha Round negotiations on global trade or the contentious Copenhagen summit on climate change. For all the brimming self-confidence that India now exudes in a variety of realms, its multilateral diplomacy remains haunted by the shadows of the country’s colonial past, resulting in a determination to prickly defend its sovereignty rather than proactively search for practical global burden-sharing solutions. As Malone puts it, New Delhi’s “negotiating style too often exhibits no ‘give’ while rarely hesitating to communicate non-negotiable principles and demands” (p. 285). This approach may play well to nationalistic audiences at home but simply will not work at the high table of international relations to which India is now acceding.9

Malone likewise faults New Delhi for not doing more to capitalize on the soft-power assets that will help in its competition with China for influence

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in Asia. India has failed, for instance, to play much on its deep cultural ties with Southeast Asia that are reinforced by the presence of a significant and influential diaspora. He suggests that tourism, particularly religious tourism, could be a much greater resource in New Delhi's relations with Asian countries, and that India's democratic model has lessons about nation-building and representative politics that would resonate throughout Asia if only the country would promote them.  

If Malone's volume offers a broad-brush portrait of the opportunities and challenges attending India's rise, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* provides a sharply-drawn focus on the institutional deficiencies that have so far prevented India from acting like a military great power. Co-authored by Stephen P. Cohen, dean of South Asia watchers in the United States, and Sunil Dasgupta, a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution, the volume is in large part a well-researched and compelling indictment of the dysfunctions of New Delhi's national security machinery that keep India from being "a traditional great power with clear strategic objectives and the military means to achieve them" (p. 1). But it is also a sympathetic appraisal of the country's deep-rooted tradition of strategic restraint that some observers condemn for making India a "soft state" or an especially timorous major power.  

Cohen and Dasgupta concede that this cautious approach produces suboptimal defense outcomes and renders India unprepared to meet some threats. However, they also emphasize that "strategic restraint has not served India poorly thus far, nor will it be an ill-conceived choice for the future. In a region characterized by many conflicts and an uneasy nuclear standoff, restraint is a positive attribute" (p. 2). Moreover, it has brought underappreciated strategic benefits. By seeking to escape the security dilemma rather than embrace it, New Delhi has positioned itself so that "other great powers in the world are facilitating, rather than fretting over" India's expansive rearmament efforts (p. xii).

The point of departure for Cohen and Dasgupta is a fundamental paradox. For all its newfound affluence and rapidly expanding defense budget, India remains puzzlingly unable to alter the military balance vis-à-vis its primary rivals, Pakistan and China, in its favor. The authors attribute this outcome, in the first instance, to an array of endemic institutional shortcomings: an

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11 See, for example, the cover story by Raj Chengappa, "Timid India," *India Today*, July 23, 2009; and Harsh V. Pant, "A Rising India’s Search for a Foreign Policy," *Orbis* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 250–64.
astonishing lack of political leadership of the armed forces, dysfunctional civil-military relations, a fundamental disunity of military purpose, a fragmented defense policymaking structure, and a highly inefficient military development and procurement system.

Marveling at “how a country of over a billion people has produced so few who understand the role of organized state force and its management” (p. 154), Cohen and Dasgupta paint an unflattering portrait of India’s political class and senior civilian bureaucracy, whose willful ignorance of defense matters is matched only by a joint desire to exclude the military establishment from an important role in policymaking. As they pointedly put it, the Indian system of “civilian control does not rest upon political leaders exercising their right to know defense questions better, but upon a calculation that the armed services must be kept in their place for bureaucratic reasons” (p. 40). Moreover, to the extent that security issues appear at all on New Delhi’s agenda, they usually have more to do with insurrectionist threats, thus causing government officials to prioritize domestic security over external threats or power projection.

This indifference has far-reaching organizational effects. Little effort is spent on the integration of strategic planning. The country has yet to produce an overall national security doctrine, and still lacks a National Security Council–type mechanism capable of distilling burgeoning national resources into a coherent grand strategy or setting strategic priorities and monitoring interagency implementation. The Defense Ministry “seems singularly incapable of fulfilling its functions” (p. 149), with most of its senior bureaucrats concerned with prosaic procurement matters rather than long-term planning or tying strategy to budgeting. Cohen and Dasgupta contend that, as a consequence of these failings, India “lacks a strategy to deal with the most pressing external threat, Pakistan, and has not been able to determine whether it should develop the capacity to match China or accommodate it” (p. 146).

Civilian indifference also allows each individual military service to pursue its own priorities uncoordinated with the other branches of the armed forces. Thus, the army is focused on implementing its much-ballyhooed Cold Start doctrine, which emphasizes swift but calibrated ground offensives to deter
Pakistani adventurism. But the air force’s resource plans do not place much emphasis on the close air support missions essential for Cold Start’s success, while the navy is more concerned with maritime influence throughout the Indian Ocean region than with bringing sea-based force to bear in a conflict with Pakistan. Furthermore, long-standing recommendations for creating a chief-of-defense post capable of adjudicating competing interservice priorities and ensuring an integrated military posture have been ignored alike by politicians fearful of enhancing the role of the armed forces in the policymaking process and by the various services, which are anxious to preserve their separate organizational autonomy.

Although India’s extraordinary levels of arms imports have drawn the attention of both global defense contractors and policy analysts, few question why such a large and affluent country continues to be so dependent on foreign sources for advanced weapons technology and lacks an efficient defense production base of its own. Cohen and Dasgupta observe that “with the exception of nuclear weapons, the history of Indian research and development has been an unhappy one. [The Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO)] is the best-funded research institution in India, but it has not produced a single weapons system that could alter the country’s strategic condition” (p. 26). The high-profile battle tank and combat aircraft projects launched by the DRDO have so far failed to produce much. New Delhi is proud of its indigenous development of ballistic missiles, but the reality is that massive investments in this area have yielded little real return. For all the vibrancy of India’s private economy, languid state-owned labs continue to dominate the military R&D sector.

All these constraints on India’s power prospects are well known to the country’s elites. So why are officials in New Delhi so passive in attending to them? The key, in Cohen and Dasgupta’s view, lies in India’s historical preference for strategic restraint and caution over assertion and risk-taking.

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12 An indication of the disconnect between army priorities and the views of the political leadership is provided in a February 2010 cable to the State Department from Timothy Roemer, the U.S. ambassador in New Delhi. He relates that “several very high level [government of India] officials have firmly stated, when asked directly about their support for Cold Start, that they have never endorsed, supported, or advocated for this doctrine….While the army may remain committed to the goals of the doctrine, political support is less clear.” Quoted from “U.S. Embassy Cables: India ‘Unlikely’ to Deploy Cold Start against Pakistan,” Guardian, December 1, 2010. For their part, Cohen and Dasgupta note that the strategy of compellence embodied in Cold Start “seems so high-risk that the political leadership is unlikely to embrace it” (p. 61).

They argue that this tradition is deeply rooted in the country’s political culture, spanning partisan boundaries, and is the product of several strands of thinking: a Gandhian self-image of India as a non-violent country and a Nehruvian subordination of military power to diplomacy, as well as an unwillingness to bear the high cost of assertive security. This pattern of fundamental caution runs throughout the country’s strategic history and explains the otherwise puzzling reticence to exploit India’s smashing victory in the 1971 Bangladesh War by coercing Pakistani concessions on Kashmir, along with New Delhi’s remarkable equanimity to the 2008 terrorist strikes in Mumbai, often regarded as “India’s September 11.” A sense of fundamental caution is also evident, the authors contend, in the slow-paced development of India’s strategic arsenal, from the prolonged hiatus in following up the 1974 nuclear test to the current pursuit of a nuclear weapons policy informed by the principles of minimum deterrence and no-first-use, even as Pakistan dramatically expands its own nuclear posture. Likewise, this enduring defensiveness explains the inability of the most hawkish voices in India’s strategic community, in spite of alarms over growing Chinese power, to gain much political traction, even in the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which should be their natural home.

Cohen and Dasgupta advance a persuasive and thoughtful case regarding the profoundly cautious nature of Indian strategic behavior. Several policy-relevant ramifications follow from their argument, one of which they focus on in some detail, while the other two are implied by their logic. The first is that U.S. hopes—so evident during the recent Bush administration—that India, with some external assistance, will develop the military wherewithal of a traditional great power and serve as an energetic geopolitical counterbalance to a more assured China are most likely to be frustrated. The authors stress that the ideological premium on preserving national autonomy will keep New Delhi from entering into a military alliance of consequence, as well as that India is unlikely to develop expeditionary capabilities that would enable it to project significant force outside its home region. Moreover, the Indian army, now bogged down in domestic counterinsurgency duties, still lacks the

capacity to undertake complex joint exercises with U.S. forces. Further, both the army and the air force evidence little institutional readiness to explore new strategic roles. Given this, Cohen and Dasgupta advise that the most promising avenue for promoting military-to-military cooperation for the time being lies with the Indian navy, the country’s most professional service and the one that displays the most capacity for long-term strategic thinking as well as being the one that arouses the least political opposition due to its overseas orientation. Yet, because the navy is also the smallest service, it does not furnish much of a basis for transforming India into a more assertive strategic actor.

Second, India’s quiescent strategic culture means that Indian experts who wish to see their country match its surging economic means with a more geopolitically active posture will likely remain disappointed.¹⁵ Last, Cohen and Dasgupta cast doubt on scholarly arguments that the ideological leanings of the BJP may well push Indian strategic weapons behavior in dangerous new directions, were the party ever to return to the helm in New Delhi.¹⁶

For many years to come, India will remain the weakest and most paradoxical member of the great-power fraternity. As Malone suggests, the country, for all its internal cleavages and external constraints, is likely to keep on confounding its critics. Yet as Cohen and Dasgupta remind us, India will also continue to exasperate its allies and friends. ◆

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