

India's Rise as an Asian Power: Nation, Neighborhood, and Region.
By Sandy Gordon. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2015. Softcover: 264pp.

Is India destined to play the role of a global power, as many proponents of its rise believe? Or will it remain mired in poverty and corruption, unable to overcome its deep social, economic and political flaws and the shackles of a troubled neighbourhood? India's future prospects have been debated in this manner almost since its independence in 1947, and such debates have only intensified since the late 1990s, when India declared its nuclear weapon capability and experienced a period of sustained economic growth.

Sandy Gordon, an Australian academic and former public servant, is one of the latest to weigh in. In *India's Rise as an Asian Power*, Gordon ably documents India's domestic and regional challenges and argues that they could well diminish India's global prospects. He attempts to uncover the interlocking problems of India's domestic pathologies — including pervasive corruption, endemic violence and democratic discontents — with the “enmeshed dissonance” of India's immediate neighbourhood. Gordon also suggests that these vulnerabilities are being exploited by Great Powers such as China and the forces of globalization, including Islamists. “[I]n order fully to realize its potential and emerge as a truly global power”, he concludes, “India has first to neutralize threats originating in South Asia by concentrating on the domestic and neighbourhood arenas of activity” (p. 211).

Broad-ranging book-length academic studies about contemporary India remain somewhat rare commodities, and Gordon provides useful details for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of Indian politics, security and socio-economic development. Yet the picture he paints of India is undeniably grim, and perhaps unduly pessimistic. While admirably wide-ranging, his analysis suffers from two important flaws.

The first is the absence of necessary context. The argument that India's rise is hobbled by its domestic weaknesses and neighbourhood dynamics requires either a comparative or historical approach. A comparison would suggest that most major powers in history rose to global prominence *despite* adverse domestic and neighbourhood conditions. This applies equally to the European colonial powers from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Soviet Union and

Japan in the early twentieth century and China over the past three decades. Indeed, the United States' emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — only after the establishment of primacy in its neighbourhood — is rather exceptional.

Alternatively, a historical analysis of India paints a far more positive picture than Gordon appears willing to concede. Measurable steps have been taken in recent years to ameliorate or mitigate some of India's most significant shortcomings. Terrorist and insurgent violence has steadily declined. The economy has diversified and become more resilient to external shocks. Electoral politics have become more competitive, and good governance is now more likely to be rewarded by the electorate. To his credit, Gordon acknowledges some of these trends. India "is in statistical terms not an especially violent place", he acknowledges at one point (p. 24). He notes the steady decline in terrorist activity and recognizes that naval expenditure, which he cites as an important indicator of India's global military potential, has increased in both absolute and relative terms.

Gordon does not let such facts get in the way of his argument, however, and concludes that India has failed "to come to grips with its internal difficulties" (p. 43). India's struggles are certainly well-documented and its capacities to play a global role remain limited in many respects. But Gordon's thesis would be far more persuasive if he were to address the largely positive trends of recent years, and examine how they might be realistically reversed.

The book's second major weakness is, unfortunately, one that is inherent to academic publishing: poor timing. For example, *NonAlignment 2.0*, an influential document compiled by non-governmental experts under the auspices of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, features prominently and is repeatedly cited by Gordon as an indication of India's external orientation. Yet the present government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done its best to overturn or distance itself from many of that document's tenets over the past year.

Similarly, steps have been taken since Modi's election victory in 2014 to address several of the domestic and diplomatic shortcomings that Gordon highlights. These include a renewed focus on India's neighbourhood, which began with Modi's invitation to neighbouring leaders to attend his inauguration, and extended to his state visit to Sri Lanka and his role in providing disaster relief following the earthquake in Nepal in April 2015. It also applies to Modi's active

attempts at seeking Western and Asian capital and technology, the renewed emphasis on India's "Look East" policy and the concentrated focus on the Indian Ocean region.

The underlying presumption of many critiques of contemporary India is that Indian policymakers are somehow unaware of the challenges facing their own country. But India's leaders, whether politicians, bureaucrats or public intellectuals, are more aware than most that India is, in Gordon's words, "a vast polity with enormous problems to overcome" (pp. 168–69). Gordon's study presents a useful, and perhaps necessary, reality check to those willing to overlook or wish away many of India's complications and contradictions. Yet it may have been a more useful exercise for him to have focused on the underlying structural causes of policy inertia and poor implementation, many of which — as Modi is finding out — may indeed prove difficult for India's leadership to overcome.

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