

India as a Rising Power: Opportunities and Constraints in the 21st Century

February 2020

- On February 4, 2020, Brookings India hosted the eighth edition of its Foreign Policy & Security Studies Tiffin Talk series, which features scholars presenting their evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.
- The presentation by **Professor T. V. Paul**, James McGill Professor of International Relations at the Department of Political Sciences, McGill University, Canada, focused on the question of status in the global hierarchy, the features of what makes a country "a great power," and India's efforts and obstacles to achieving this status.
- The lead discussants were **Ambassador Sujan Chinoy**, Director General, Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA) and **Dr. Rajat Kathuria**, Director and Chief Executive Officer, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER).
- The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy & Security Studies, Brookings India. In attendance were retired officials from the Ministry of External Affairs and scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities.

India's Quest for Status

Prof. Paul, in explaining the contours of his upcoming book project described what was meant by status, and its relevance to India's global ambitions. He described international status as "a systemic phenomenon, meaning you get opportunities only rarely," linking them most often to the ends of world wars such as with the Vienna Settlement and the Paris Settlements. "India missed the boat" on that front, as well as others later on. He explained both what was meant by status (i.e. collective beliefs about a given state's valued attributes) and the notion of "great power status," as well as its largely European construct. After discussing the various constraints, opportunities, and status markers, he highlighted some of the core methods that could aid in the process of fulfilling the preconditions for great power status, including investments in technology, hard power, infrastructure, etc. He also highlighted that the earlier models of guaranteeing power structures, i.e. what was used by European powers, is no longer possible, as it was rooted in fighting wars.

One lead discussant proposed that "India's quest is not for great power status," and that "great power itself is a concept that is not easily defined." He pointed out the different phases of India's power status, from its "bottom of the rung" status during the British period, to its subsequent shaping into a moral power under Mahatma Gandhi, followed by continued shaping during the period after independence, to the 1990s and beyond. He concluded by describing status as "an aspiration, but not a destination."

Status without Economic Reform?

Focusing on the economic side of some of the themes, one participant anchored his response in state capacity, highlighting a line in the recently released Economic Survey which described trust as a "public good" that increases as you produce more of it. He thus posed his remarks in the light of how "India has not been able to create that capacity and thereby engender trust within society, between public and private, public and citizens, etc" which has contributed to the "starts and stops" of India's growth.

The participant pointed out how India in its development has gone through "multiple mutinies" and a number of transitions, e.g. from informal to formal, public to private, from socialism to marketism. In making those transitions, institutions become crucial.

He described India's engagement in international trade as "ambivalent, lacking a strategic vision." At the same time, India has been more assertive in the international scene. Looking to Japan, Korea, and the other East Asian miracles, it was pointed out that "an investment-driven model cannot sustain itself without an export-driven strategy".

An interesting point raised by another participant during the question-and-answer session related to the actual measuring of status. She pointed out some of the innate realities of the current situation in India, including the low labour-force participation rate of India as compared to its competitors like China and Vietnam.

The Crucial Role of Institutions

Going into some depth on the topic of institutions, one lead discussant commented that “the quality of [India’s] institutions did not pull up as our growth happened,” creating issues of crony capitalism and a trend of incentivising toxic relationships with politicians. He suggested that institutions such as regulatory bodies like the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) must ensure that the market is regulated by its own dynamics and not supportive of only one business group. He emphasised the need for such institutions to retain their independence, and their role in guiding growth in the right direction.

In discussing the actual approach to reforms and institutional changes, the participant described India’s approach as being gradualist rather than focusing on big-bang change. He suggested that this gradualism should be deliberate, in order to ensure ease for backtracking in case mistakes are made.

“Hide your Strength, Bide your Time”

Emphasising a final theme at the end of the question-and-answer session, one participant picked off from the points raised earlier regarding how China had benefited from being a “political pariah”, out of the World War II structure, owing to internal balancing and a focus on economy and institutions before emerging as an economic and military player. The participant asked “to what extent...do we over-emphasise sometimes the external balancing?” He highlighted the general tendency amongst practitioners and scholars in his own field to skew towards focusing on external perception of status over the internal structures that would be required, citing the example of the lack of Indo-Nepal rail linkages compared to China-Nepal flights.



(From L to R): Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Brookings India; Professor T. V. Paul, James McGill Professor of International Relations, Department of Political Sciences, McGill University; Ambassador Sujan Chinoy, Director General, Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA); Dr. Rajat Kathuria, Director and Chief Executive Officer, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER).

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