

## **Assessing China and India's Great Powers Status from a Realist Perspective**

At the end of the Cold War, the United States was left as the only super power in the world. Some have argued that this new 'unipolar' state of the international system was a passing moment that would not last long,<sup>1</sup> while others have argued that this new status of the US as the unipole would be more durable and long lasting than otherwise predicted.<sup>2</sup> As the world entered the new millennium, the US remained the most powerful state in the world. As time progressed though, it became clear that the position the US maintained would not be permanent as other countries began to grow economically, taking up larger and larger portions of the global GDP, in what has been termed 'the rise of the rest'.<sup>3</sup>

Among these fast-growing states, China and India have demonstrated themselves to be influential rising powers. Both countries possess large populations (the largest and second largest populations respectively, with 37% of the people in the world living in those two countries<sup>4</sup>), large landmass by area (fourth and seventh largest respectively<sup>5</sup>), and economies that are growing at high rates. Despite this potential for great power status by these two countries in the future, it remains unclear if they can be considered great powers at the moment based solely on their economic growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* 70.1 (1990): 23; Layne, Christopher. "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment." *International Security* 31.2 (2006): 7-41.

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. *World Out of Balance*. Princeton U Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. *The post-American world*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011.

<sup>4</sup> "United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013) World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision." *World Population Prospects Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP.228*. (2013): 3. Web: [https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/publications/Files/WPP2012\\_HIGHLIGHTS.pdf](https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/publications/Files/WPP2012_HIGHLIGHTS.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> "The Largest Countries in the World." *WorldAtlas*. N.p., 13 Feb. 2017. Accessed: 18 Feb. 2017. <http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-largest-countries-in-the-world-the-biggest-nations-as-determined-by-total-land-area.html>

This paper will consider the rise of China and India from a realist perspective, and assess if they can truly be termed great powers. The paper will argue that despite large overall economies, both China and India display under-developed and technologically unsophisticated economies. This hinders their military potential, and from a realist perspective, means that the large size of their respective economies does not grant them great power status. This claim will be justified by comparing the economic sophistication and the military composition of these two countries with those of the US. This will be done to help understand how India and China compare to the most powerful state in the system and if they have the capability to challenge it, which would be indicative of great power status.

### **Theoretical Background**

International relations scholars have always been preoccupied with great power, how they rise, and how they decline. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy states that the position of the leading state in the international system is never constant, and that its relative strength will decline over time in comparison to other states, leading to the rise of new powers in the system.<sup>6</sup> Gilpin has also asserted that a leading state will experience power erosion due to “differential growth”,<sup>7</sup> resulting in its decline and the rise of other states.

Several theoretical perspectives can be used to understand and explain if states have achieved great power status. The main school of thought that has traditionally dealt with the issue of great power competition has been realism which is primarily concerned with the distribution of material wealth and military capability. Realist analysis rests on the assumption that the international system is anarchic and that there is no regulating hierarchy

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, Paul M. *The rise and fall of great powers*. New York: Random House, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1981: 186.

in the system to prevent states from behaving in self-serving ways at the expense of other states. This results in a self-help system in which states do what they can to survive, and the only way to survive is to accumulate power and influence in the system.<sup>8</sup> From a neo-realist perspective, states become great powers “on the basis of their relative military capability. To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world.”<sup>9</sup> According to this view, a state cannot be classified as a great power based solely on its economic strength. A state needs to be able to convert that economic capacity into a viable military strength with which it can defend itself, project power, and to influence and challenge the leading states in the system.

Another theoretical school of thought, liberal-institutionalism, argues that the system is indeed anarchic but that this can be overcome using institutions which may facilitate cooperation rather than competition between states.<sup>10</sup> Institutionalists, like realists, assume that conflict stems from insecurity, and a lack of information regarding the intentions, capability, and reliability of other states. This obstacle to cooperation can be ameliorated with the use of institutions, as they reduce uncertainty and increase communication between states, place incentives to reduce cheating, and clarify the intentions of other states and their interests.<sup>11</sup> According to Morgenthau, the debate between realists and liberals is a debate between what is possible as opposed to what is desirable.<sup>12</sup> Ikenberry has made a persuasive argument that the US has gained significantly from the web of international organizations which were created after the end of the second world war, at the urging of US policy makers.<sup>13</sup> As such, Institutionalism would argue that the economic power of a state alone cannot classify it as a great power as long as that wealth is not converted into a larger

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<sup>8</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–49.

<sup>9</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014: 5.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, Jack. "One World, Rival Theories." *Foreign Policy* 145 (2004): 56.

<sup>11</sup> Keohane, Robert O., and Lisa L. Martin. "The Promise of Institutional Theory." 39 - 46

<sup>12</sup> Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among nations; the struggle for power and peace*: 6

<sup>13</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. *After victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*. Place of publication not identified: Princeton U Pres, 2016.

role for that state in already existing international organizations, or into the creation of new institutions and organizations that can protect the interests of that state.

Finally, Constructivism as a school of thought within International Relations can be used to explain and understand the great power status of emerging states. Constructivists believe that social reality, and as such, international politics, is constructed by certain actors, and is based on ideas, norms and values which act as the “fundamental building blocks of international life.”<sup>14</sup> As Alexander Wendt has emphasized, “self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure.”<sup>15</sup> Constructivists, unlike realists and liberals, privilege non-state actors in their ability to influence international relations.

Constructivists also emphasize the role of perception in identity formation,<sup>16</sup> which means that to be labelled as a great power, a state must not only believe itself to be so, but must be perceived by the international community as a great power as well. Through this perspective, to be labelled a great power, a state must be able to shape norms and values, and they must be perceived as being great powers by other states.

For the purposes of this paper, a realist view of international relations will be used to assess if countries such as India and China might be considered great powers based solely on their economic strengths. As such, the remainder of this paper will examine the material capabilities of India and China, as per realism.

Constructivist theories will not be employed in this paper because of the difficulty in assessing the views that other states have regarding India and China, and the difficulty and space constraints in identifying their role in norm entrepreneurship. Constructivist theories

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<sup>14</sup> Snyder, Jack. "One World, Rival Theories.": 60

<sup>15</sup> Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International Organization* 46.02 (1992): 394.

<sup>16</sup> Fierke, Karin M. *Critical Approaches to International security*. Second edition ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. Print.

are better suited at identifying if Indian and Chinese leaders seek great power status than at understanding if they have already achieved that status. Liberal theories will not be used as it seems that countries such as China have not been participating in the formation of international organizations.<sup>17</sup> As such, it is difficult to assess if India and China are Liberal-institutionalist powers, as their contribution to international organizations are not clear cut. Additionally, it is the belief of the author that India and China's new acquisition of foreign military bases in Tajikistan<sup>18</sup> and Djibouti<sup>19</sup>, respectively, and their acquisition of aircraft carriers cannot be explained using either institutionalist or constructivist theories which would assume that these countries would not necessarily focus on their power projection capabilities. Realism on the other hand can easily explain that both these states will behave as any other power would and attempt to expand their military reach. As such, realism will be the primary analytical lens of this paper.

### **Are India and China Great Powers from a Realist Perspective?**

In order to understand if China and India truly are great powers, we must first define and operationalize the concept of a 'great power', and what attributes a state must possess to be classified as such. A number of conceptions of attributes required by great powers will be identified below.

As we have seen above, Mearsheimer defines a great power according to the state's ability to be able to fight the strongest state in the system. Posen has argued that "the key military enabler of the U.S. global power position" stems from its ability to control and command

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<sup>17</sup> Bergsten, C. Fred. "A Partnership of Equals." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 2008), pp. 57-69.

<sup>18</sup> Joshi, Shashank. "A SURVEY OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT." *Asian Affairs* 47.2 (2016): 239.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, Andrew. "U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbour in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base." *The New York Times*. 25 Feb. 2017. Accessed: 26 Feb. 2017. <[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/africa/us-djibouti-chinese-naval-base.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/africa/us-djibouti-chinese-naval-base.html?_r=0)>.

the commons of air, space, and sea.<sup>20</sup> Posen's argument would lead us to consider that a great power needs to be able to challenge the US in one, if not all, of these domains.

According to Waltz, a state needs to possess a range of factors to be considered a great power, including size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, and competence.<sup>21</sup> Hurrell has identified a set of factors that classify a great power, including "a range of economic, military and political power resources; some capacity to contribute to the production of international order, regionally or globally; and some degree of internal cohesion and capacity for effective state action."<sup>22</sup>

This paper will utilize the above conceptions of great power status and claim that to be a great power in the system, a state must be strong enough to constitute a 'pole' within the system.<sup>23</sup> Only if a state can modify the international or regional system by challenging the most powerful state, and the unipolar system, then it can unambiguously be termed a great power. But as has been pointed out by others, by considering rising powers through the lens of unipolarity, we are limited in our ability to assess changes within the system, changes that are not influential enough to change the system but are worth examining none the less.<sup>24</sup> Despite this valid criticism of assessing rising great powers through the lens of unipolarity, this paper will utilize the 'polarity' lens for the sake of simplification in assessing if China and India truly are great powers based on their economic strengths.

## **Economic Background**

After the end of the Cold War, India lost an ally in the Soviet Union, which has led the country to carry out economic reforms at the behest of the International Monetary Fund

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<sup>20</sup> Posen, Barry R. "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony." *International Security* 28.1 (2003): 8.

<sup>21</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of international politics*. Mass.: Adison-Wesley, 1979: 131.

<sup>22</sup> Hurrell, Andrew. "Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?" *International Affairs* 82.1 (2006): 1.

<sup>23</sup> Wohlforth, William C. "The Stability of a Unipolar World." *International Security* 24.1 (1999): 5-41.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century." *International Security* 40.3 (Winter 2015/16): 8.

(IMF).<sup>25</sup> These reforms led the way to greater economic growth than the country has experienced in the past, leading to a GDP growth rate of 5.7% in the 1990's, and 6.9% in the 2000's.<sup>26</sup> In 2016, the country experienced GDP growth of 7.6%, resulting in a \$2.251 trillion overall GDP at market exchange rate, and \$8.71 trillion at purchasing power parity (PPP), making it the 4<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, China began to reform its economic system and opened its economy to the international markets which started an era of fast economic growth, culminating in the country joining the World Trade Organization.<sup>28</sup> As of 2008, the country possessed \$1.9 trillion in foreign reserves, the largest held by a single country in the world.<sup>29</sup> In 2016, China's GDP growth rate was 6.6%, a slowdown from 6.9% in 2015, and 7.3% in 2014. The country's GDP measured on PPP amounted to \$21.27 trillion, making it the largest economy in the world. Though the country's GDP measured at market exchange value amounted in \$11.39 trillion, making it the second largest economy in the world.<sup>30</sup>

Both India and China have demonstrated remarkable growth over the past few decades, propelling them to the top of the world's largest economies list. Though the growth they have demonstrated is remarkable, several scholars have projected their current economic growth well into the future without considering possible obstacles.<sup>31</sup> These assumptions neglect possible internal disturbances as well as the understanding that as they begin to reach parity with the rest of the world's developed economies, their growth rates will slow

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<sup>25</sup> Wagner, Christian. "India's Gradual Rise." *Politics*, 30.1\_suppl (2010): 63.

<sup>26</sup> Ogden, Chris. *Indian foreign policy: ambition and transition*. Malden: Polity Press, 2014, Ebook: 137.

<sup>27</sup> "The World Factbook: INDIA." *CIA Factbook*, Accessed: 21 Feb 2017.

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Lanteigne, Marc. *Chinese foreign policy: an introduction*. London: Routledge, 2016: 39.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*: 40.

<sup>30</sup> "The World Factbook: CHINA." *CIA Factbook*. Accessed: 21 Feb. 2017.

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Lanteigne, Marc. *Chinese foreign policy: an introduction*. London: Routledge, 2016: 40; Winters, L. Alan, and Shahid Yusuf. *Dancing with giants: China, India, and the global economy*. Washington: World Bank, 2007: 1.

down and struggle to break into a high-income status.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, despite their large economic growth, their future economic growth is by no means guaranteed or inevitable.

Though both India and China have experienced massive economic growth, it must be kept in mind that China's economy still dwarfs that of India. At market exchange rates, China's economy is five times as large as that of India's. Measured by PPP, China's economy is almost 2.5 times as large as that of India's. While China's GDP per Capita in PPP is more than twice as that of India's. This indicates that in terms of great power status, China seems to be a greater contender for that title than India is. As Bergsten has stated, "China will dominate its Asian neighbour for the foreseeable future."<sup>33</sup>

### **Economic Size is not Enough**

Even though it is widely understood that economic power is foundation for great power status in the international system, there are different methods by which one can measure the economic strength of a country. Even though China's economy has been growing at a staggering pace, using certain measurements lead to different conclusion. As some have argued, the size of an economy on its own is not sufficient to measure the true economic power of a state, "aggregating a lot poor people into one economy does not make it capable of generating power internationally."<sup>34</sup>

PPP measurements of China and India's economy might result in distorted views about their great power capability. Using PPP measurements shows that China has the largest world economy, larger than if it was measured at market exchange rates. Yet at the same time, using PPP measurements, we could see that India had a larger economy than Great Britain

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<sup>32</sup> Eichengreen, Barry, Donghyun Park, and Kwanho Shin. "When Fast-Growing Economies Slow Down: International Evidence and Implications for China." *Asian Economic Papers* 11.1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 42-87.

<sup>33</sup> Bergsten, C. Fred. "A Partnership of Equals.": 57.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. *World Out of Balance*. Princeton U Press, 2010: 40.



in the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>35</sup> yet not one would argue that India was a greater power than Great Britain was at the time. This leads to the conclusion the PPP measurements might not be the best indicator of great power status, they are better indicators of living standards rather than of power capability.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, measuring a state's economic sophistication and development is better carried out through measurements of GDP per capita, rather than simple GDP measurements, which only indicates the general size of the economy.<sup>37</sup> Since a sophisticated and technologically developed economy is necessary for military innovation and independent production to occur,<sup>38</sup> we must take a deeper look at the economies of India and China in order to understand their level of sophistication.

In terms of GDP per capita there is a large discrepancy between China, India, and the US. In 2014, India achieved a GDP per capita of \$1,626, while China attained \$7,588. The US outdid those figures at \$54,596 GDP per capita, about 7 times larger than that of China's, and about 33 times larger than that of India's.<sup>39</sup>

Another measure of a state's economic sophistication is the gross domestic expenditure on research and development. In 2011, India spent \$14.2 billion on research and development (R&D), while China spent \$134.7 billion, almost ten times as much as India spent. As we have argued earlier, India and China must be able to compete with the US, which spent \$442.7 billion on R&D, to be considered great powers, and as has been shown, the US still maintains a large lead over both these countries.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid: 40-41.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid: 42

<sup>37</sup> Beckley, Michael. "Economic Development and Military Effectiveness." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33.1 (2010): 54.

<sup>38</sup> Krause, Keith. *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992: 21.

<sup>39</sup> GDP per capita figure taken from: Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. *America abroad: The United States' global role in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Oxford U Press, 2016: 31.

<sup>40</sup> R&D data taken from: Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. *America abroad: The United States' global role in the 21st century*: 25.

Infant mortality is also another measure of development within a country as it can be used as a measure of human capital and of economic strength. India experiences 43.8 infant mortalities per 1,000 births, while China experiences 13 mortalities per 1,000 births. The US sees 6.1 infant mortalities per 1,000 births, about half of that of China's and seven times less than that of India's. These figures indicate that China and India might enjoy large economies, but that their development still lags far behind that of the US.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in terms of pure military spending and military force, there remains a large gap between India and China, and the US. In 2014, India allocated \$51.1<sup>42</sup> billion to defence spending, while China spent \$145 billion on its military,<sup>43</sup> and the US has dedicated \$604 billion to its defence budget.<sup>44</sup> Though the gap between China and India's military spending, compared with that of the US has been closing for some time, the US still spends nearly three times as much as China does on its military and over 12 times as much as India spends.

Additionally, it takes 15 – 20 years to research, develop, and mass produce military equipment,<sup>45</sup> meaning that when China and India do reach parity with the US in military spending, it will still take many more years to develop a sophisticated military infrastructure capable of expanding productive capacity.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, as Posen has detailed, “development of new weapons and tactics depends on decades of expensively accumulated technological and tactical experience embodied in the institutional memory of public and private military research and development organizations.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision." 86 – 90.

<sup>42</sup> The military balance 2017, Chapter 6: Asia" *The Military Balance* 117.1 (2017): 289.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 278.

<sup>44</sup> The military balance 2017, Chapter 10: North America" *The Military Balance* 117.1 (2017): 45.

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century.": 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid: 19.

<sup>47</sup> Posen, Barry. "Command of the Commons.": 10.

These economic figures, which lay the foundation for a strong military capability, have shown that despite large economies with high growth rates, China and India still lack a sophisticated and developed economy, which are necessary for high tech, independent military development. In fact, Chinese leaders plan to reach technological parity with the US only by the year 2050.<sup>48</sup> Without the requisite economic development, these countries will not be able to compete with the US or to challenge the unipolar nature of the system, which from a realist perspective that emphasizes material and military power, indicates that these countries still do not constitute ‘poles’, or great powers.

### **Military Assets**

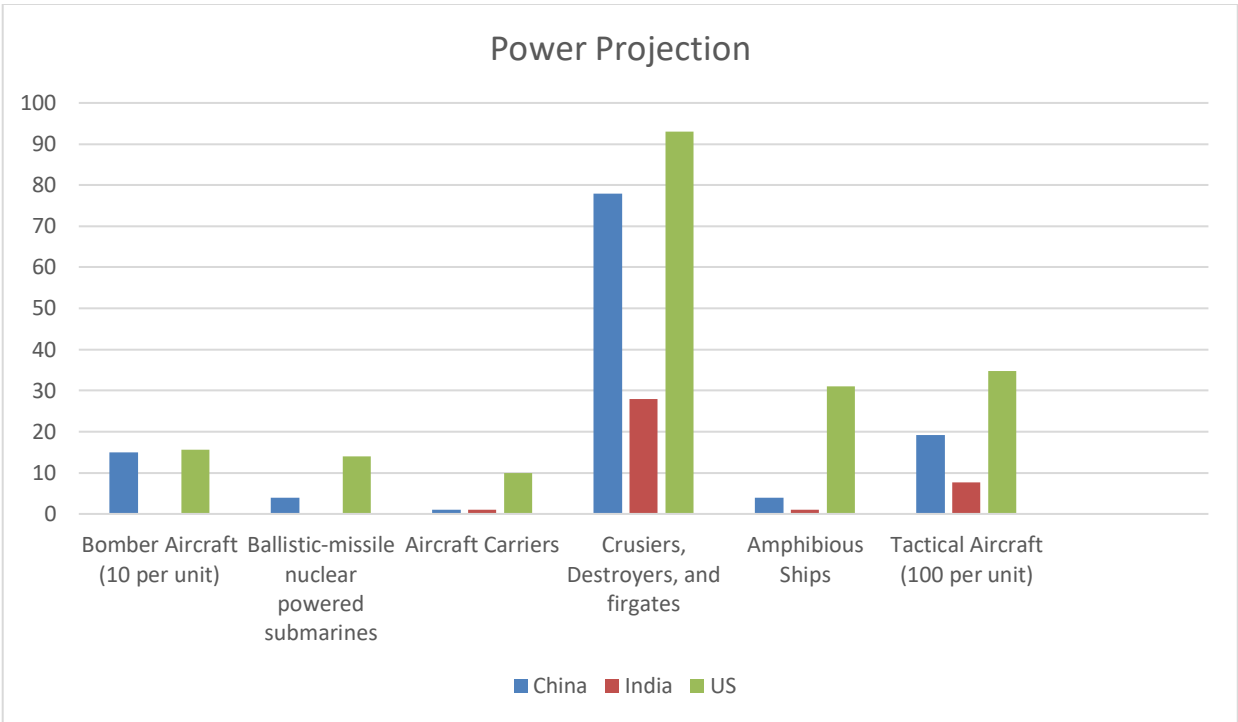
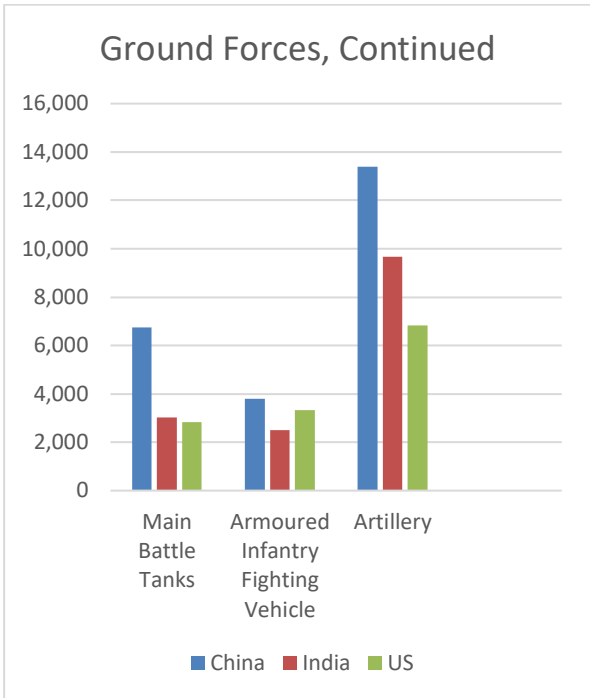
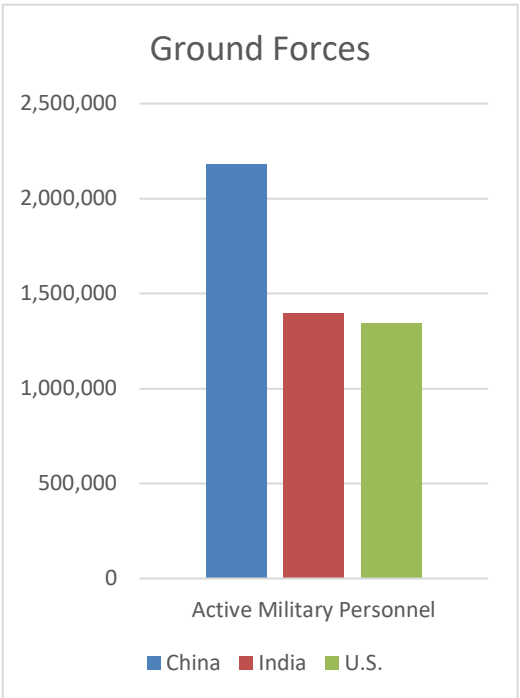
In this final section, the military assets possessed by India, China, and the US will be compared in an effort to demonstrate the military gap between China and India, and the US. One weakness with this approach is that it only compares the quantity of assets, rather than the quality of said assets.<sup>49</sup>

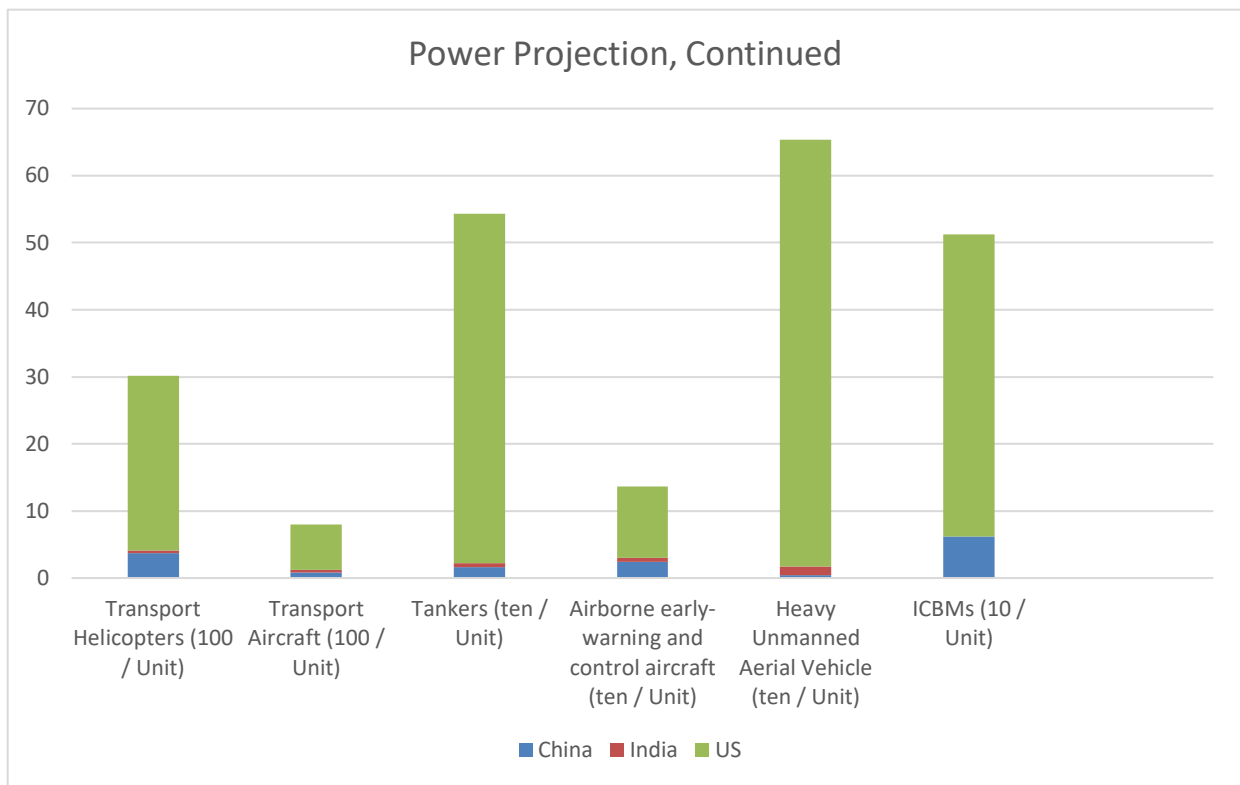
In ground forces, China and India, in most cases, either outnumber the US or match its capability. These figures show that China outnumbers both India and the US in pure numbers in these fields, giving it a numerical superiority on the ground.

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<sup>48</sup> The military balance 2017, Chapter 6: Asia" *The Military Balance* 117.1 (2017): 260.

<sup>49</sup> All military asset data taken from: "The military balance 2017, Chapter 2: Comparative Defence Statistics." *The Military Balance* 117.1 (2017): 19 – 26.





As can be seen in the charts displayed above, China and India either outnumber or match the US in the number of ground forces that they possess. But in terms of power projection – the ability to carry out military action far from one’s borders – they are far behind the US. This means that they cannot challenge the US in regions beyond their own. Additionally, the lack of for power projection assets can either be credited to a lack of desire by these countries to project force abroad, or because the assets needed for such a projection are much more technologically sophisticated than these states are able to provide.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

China, India, and other states are rising at a fast pace, and one day soon they may become great powers, but for the meantime, they do not seem to be able to compete with the US, and as such, it has been argued that they cannot be classified as great powers based solely on their economic growth, at least not yet. In addition to the gap that exists between The US and China’s military capability, a further gap has been identified to exist between China and

<sup>50</sup> Figures for India: ICBM, bombers, and submarines were not available.

India's military capability. Leading to the conclusion that China has the most potential for great power status, while India has a much longer road to travel. Only realist theory is able to explain why these states are perusing power projection assets, both liberal and constructivist theories cannot. Realism also show that in terms of great power status, these states have still not achieved that title but will presumably reach for it when they are more militarily capable.

If these countries become great powers, it will depend on sustained economic growth, and investment into high-tech manufacturing and development for years to come. After a long period of such investment, these countries will possess the infrastructure necessary to develop a military industry capable of challenging the US, which according to the standard applied by this paper, will unambiguously grant them the title of great powers.

Investing sufficient funds into military development will be a choice for those countries' leaders, respectively, something that is difficult to predict using realist theory, but that might be more efficiently approached using constructivist theories. As Kenneth Waltz has stated, "realist theory is better at saying what will happen than in saying when it will happen."<sup>51</sup> Future constructivist research might uncover when India and China's leadership intend to seek great power status, and if they will challenge the international order, or not.

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<sup>51</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25.1 (2000): 27.

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