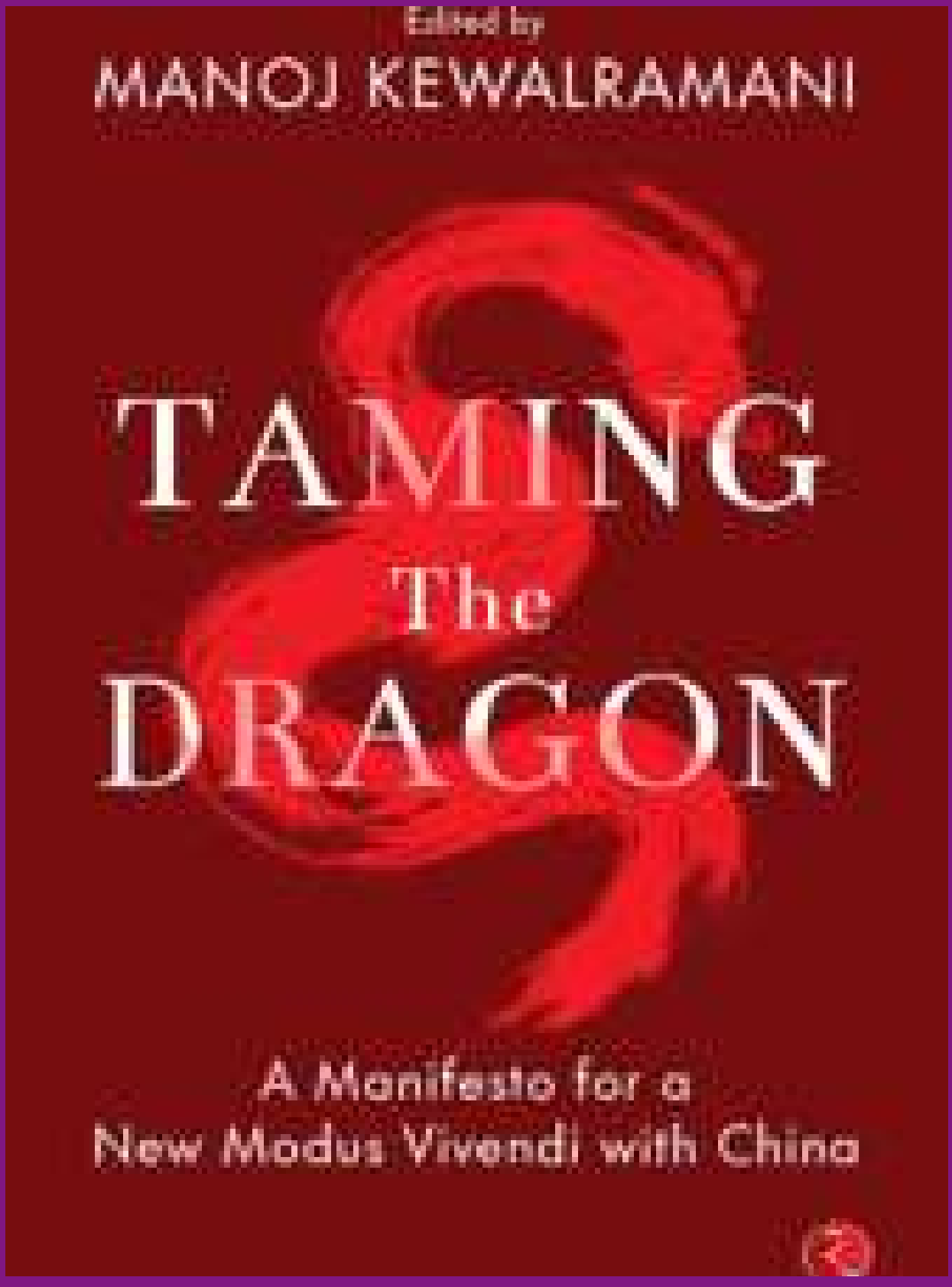
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BOOK REVIEW

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TAMING THE DRAGON: A MANIFESTO FOR A NEW MODUS VIVENDI WITH CHINA

by Manoj Kewalramani



The India-China relationship is one of the most consequential relationships for Asia as a whole, critical for regional stability in South Asia, and with tangible spillover effects across the relationships for the heavyweights in the region, such as Japan, as well as for the critical outside players, such as the US.

It is also one of the most enigmatic relationships as well. China famously operates under a guise of perceived mystery. One instance, recently, has been the Galwan standoff. While the world was battling the COVID-19 pandemic, scuffles broke out between China and India. The outcome of it all - the short actual battle, the loss of life on both sides with numbers widely disputed, the prolonged diplomatic efforts to attain normalcy - has been a fundamentally altered India-China relationship.

It could be argued that Galwan has been as significant as the 1962 war has been for India-China ties - nothing could be the same as before. Post Galwan, India shut down flights to China, curbed Chinese investments and banned Chinese tech firms. But, in the current era of complex interdependence, can we isolate ourselves from any country, let alone China, our largest neighbour? This is one among the questions Taming the Dragon aims to address.

The Book

The book is edited by Manoj Kewalramani, chairperson of the Geostrategy Programme at the Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru. He has a long track record of covering China as a journalist and a researcher, with multiple books authored on the topic. Other contributors - Anushka Saxena, Amit Kumar, Vanshika Saraf and Rakshith Shetty - are researchers and analysts associated with China studies in the Takshashila Institution and elsewhere.

The book is structured in the following manner - an editor's note; an introductory essay by the editor, titled "Asymmetry and Disorder: Why is the India-China Relationship so Volatile?"; followed by five chapters: "Suspicious Minds: How China and India Think About Each Other" by Manoj Kewalramani; "Keeping the Powder Dry: A New Security Outlook for India's China Policy" by Anushka Saxena; "The Intractable Dilemma: A Vision for De-risking Trade with China" by Amit Kumar; "Partners for Power: How India Must Engage China and the World" by Manoj Kewalramani and Vanshika Saraf; and "Confident, Not Coy: Why Openness is an Asset for India" by Rakshith Shetty.

The Core Arguments

The contributors argue that India needs to establish a new equilibrium in its relationship with China - a new modus vivendi. Through the book, the contributors try to outline a possible framework for the new normal.

The book begins with an editor's note, by Manoj Kewalramani. It sets out the aim and scope of Taming the Dragon - a prescriptive book for resetting India-China ties post Galwan, with atma shakti, or self-strengthening, as the core prescription for India. It also sets out the limits of the book, e.g., it does not cover the role of Tibet in the India-China relations. What it sets out to discuss is how India should think about incorporating atma shakti into economic policy, military preparedness, external partnerships, trade and investment, and engagement with China.

The Editor's Note is followed by an introductory essay by Manoj Kewalramani, titled "Asymmetry and Disorder: Why is the India-China Relationship so Volatile?". This provides an overview of the evolution of the relationship and the contemporary context in which India-China relations now operate, including deepening India-US ties.

The core of the book lies in five topical essays by various contributors, discussing India's economic policy, military preparedness, external partnerships, trade and investment, and engagement with China.

Suspicious Minds: How China and India Think About Each Other

This chapter by Manoj Kewalramani lays out, in excellent detail, how the different cogs of India's policy wheel, from the offices of the Prime Minister and the External Affairs Minister to the Foreign Secretaries and diplomats to the various political parties and organisations that influence policy, think about China. The author also lays out the recent history - post 2014 - as it is the time period during which the current policy outlook has evolved.

The author also brings out, quite usefully, the evolution of Chinese thinking on India. This is also quite detailed, including multiple contemporary views from various Chinese scholars put into perspective. Here, we see a convergence among the Chinese policy community that there is increasing resonance between India's and the US' designs against China, and thus India should be 'contained'. Chinese views and official statements, the author lays out, tend to be diplomatic and pragmatic but substantially continue to view India as a threat and a challenge.

This chapter, along with the introductory essay, is fundamental to analysing India-China relationships in the current era.

Keeping the Powder Dry: A New Security Outlook for India's China Policy

This ambitious chapter by Anushka Saxena examines the key aspects of India's security policy vis-a-vis China - starting from conventional military challenges posed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA); key maritime challenges posed by China; cyber-based threats emanating from Chinese state-sponsored and territory-

actors; the need for the creation of a modern, integrated force structure; and finally, the budgetary allocations and capital outlays present and needed.

This chapter is a must read for defence personnel and strategists who are keenly aware of the challenges posed by our northern neighbour. Not only does it closely examine the current deployment of forces and assets, as far as available in the public domain, but it also examines in critical detail the infrastructure, force structure and emerging concerns such as drones in the border region, especially Ladakh.

The Chinese mode of civil-military fusion, the use of civilian assets for military use, e.g., ships and ports, cannot be discounted when India is laying out a security strategy for India. This is perhaps the most pertinent in the maritime challenges posed by China - including the use of civilian and fishing vessels for surveying.

The cyber realm is one where the competition is turning into confrontations, as attacks targeting Indian power grids around 2022 show. The author highlights China's capabilities in this regard as well as the need for a structured, coordinated response that should not stop at defence but should look at offence as well.

The analysis of budgetary outlays is instructive to the policymakers, highlighting the need for not only more efficient outlays, but also for indigenisation. This will continue to be a core theme of the book - the reliance on atma shakti.

The Intractable Dilemma: A Vision for De-risking Trade with China

This chapter by Amit Kumar addresses the trade relations between India and China. The chapter looks at issues such as Chinese industrial overcapacity, Indian dependence on Chinese goods on critical sectors, and China's weaponisation of trade. It does so by focusing on case studies of organic chemicals, machinery and mechanical appliances, and electrical machinery and equipment.

The chapter prescribes diversification and suggests that current pursuit of atmanirbharta through subsidies and Production Linked Incentives (PLI) schemes are not the way forward - rather, it calls for making India more FDI - friendly and capitalising on the 'friendshoring' attempts that are ongoing across the globe.

Partners for Power: How India Must Engage China and the World

Co-authored by Manoj Kewalramani and Vanshika Saraf, this chapter examines how India and China approach the world, seeking to work the world order based on their respective worldviews. Here, the Indian aim of a 'multipolar Asia in a multipolar world' comes to conflict with the Chinese 'unipolar Asia in a multipolar world'.

The chapter examines the divergent approaches of India and China towards multilateral institutions, emerging issues such as data governance and climate change. It also notes that there are many convergences as well - which can serve both countries well. The chapter serves as a useful overview for the foreign policies of India and China.

As a prescription, the chapter offers a dual-track strategy: strategic autonomy and counterbalancing by linking up with like-minded partners on multiple issues on the world stage and direct and sustained engagement with China through strategic and economic dialogues, managing the boundary issue and engaging in topical dialogues on issues such as climate change.

Confident, Not Coy: Why Openess is an Asset for India

This chapter by Rakshith Shetty lays out one of the major issues in the India-China relationship — the dwindling people-to-people (P2P) interactions. Post Galwan, there has been a constraint on visas, flights, tourism and journalistic interactions, which, the author points out, is leading to policy decisions, from either side, coming as a result of mediated impressions rather than something indigenous. That is to say, there is an epistemic divide between the two states' thinking about each other.

The author outlines the case for sustained people-to-people interactions on the basis of theoretical frameworks (realism, constructivism and psychology) as well as pragmatic reasons. To quote, "by abandoning what Chinese scholars' term 'relational capital' (guanxi ziben) — the advantage gained through sustained, trust-based relationships — India risks not only misreading critical inflection points in China's political economy but also relinquishing control of its strategic narrative to external actors whose assessments may diverge from India's developmental priorities and security imperatives".

The author suggests that India ought to utilise openness in a strategic manner. There are multiple historical and current examples of this outlined in the article, such as the Franco-German and South Korea-Japan relations post-conflict. Regarding the potency of the open relationship between India and China being abused by the Chinese security establishment for adversarial purposes, the author highlights the case of Taiwan, where institutional safeguards protect the openness.

The authors' prescriptions for addressing the disconnect are relatively conventional - media fellowships, think tank diplomacy, increased student exchanges, etc. The need for language training is noted. These are, the author rightly notes, a foundation for cultivating a long-term, sustained effort to understand China directly from the Indian side. There are hardly any quick remedies here, which the Indian security establishment should well note.

Assessing the Book

Taming the Dragon offers a useful and multidimensional assessment of India–China relations in the aftermath of Galwan. Its principal strength lies in connecting economic dependence, military preparedness, international partnerships, and people-to-people engagement within a common framework of atma shakti.

The book is particularly valuable in its treatment of security challenges and economic vulnerabilities. The discussion of conventional military capabilities, maritime competition, cyber threats, and force modernisation provides a broad basis for understanding the demands of India's security environment. Similarly, the examination of trade dependence and the case for diversification raises important questions about the sustainability of existing economic relationships. The emphasis on international partnerships and direct engagement with China further recognises that strategic competition need not preclude selective cooperation.

Nevertheless, the volume's prescriptions could be developed further. Although atma shakti provides a unifying strategic vision, its practical value ultimately depends on how effectively it can be translated into prioritised and implementable policies. The chapter by Anushka Saxena on security policy would benefit from a stronger articulation of the strategic priorities connecting identified threats to force development and resource allocation. In the economic domain, the discussion of de-risking could be supplemented by greater attention to critical dependencies, including rare earths, and the practical constraints involved in diversifying supply chains. More broadly, the relationship between long-term self-strengthening and the medium-term requirements of economic growth, defence preparedness, and diplomatic engagement warrants further consideration.

The book's stated scope also imposes limits on its analysis. The omission of Tibet and that of critical minerals, for instance, narrows the range of issues covered in an already complex relationship. This does not invalidate the volume's central argument, but it should be recognised when assessing the comprehensiveness of its framework. Likewise, the case for greater people-to-people engagement is persuasive as a means of improving mutual understanding, but its implementation requires careful and pragmatic consideration of the relationship between openness and security.

These limitations do not diminish the book's contribution. Rather, they point to the distinction between diagnosing India's vulnerabilities and developing a fully operational strategy for addressing them. The volume is strongest as a structured account of the challenges confronting Indian policymakers and as an argument for treating economic resilience, military preparedness, and informed engagement as mutually reinforcing priorities.

Conclusion

Taming the Dragon makes a valuable contribution to understanding the strategic challenges in resetting the India-China relationship. The volume offers a useful foundation for discussion among scholars, defence practitioners, and policymakers. Its contribution lies less in providing a definitive solution to the India–China dilemma than in demonstrating why managing the relationship requires a more nuanced approach to India's view of China.

Reviewed by
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