

# Beyond Strategic Patience

## Practicing Strategy in addressing India's China Challenge

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In the expanding body of Indian policy literature on managing the China challenge since the 2020 border crisis, this article focuses on two works: Bambawale et al.'s *Rising to the China Challenge: Winning through Strategic Patience and Economic Growth* (2021), and Kewalramani (ed.)'s *Taming the Dragon: A Manifesto for a New Modus Vivendi with China* (2026). Published roughly five years apart, the two help assess how thinking in India has evolved over this period. While the earlier work defines the direction of "Strategic Patience" at a conceptual level, the later work translates that direction into ground-level prescriptions for its practical implementation.

### **Strategic Patience as framework - Context from "Rising to the China Challenge"**

The book *Rising to the China Challenge* stands out as an early and influential contribution, bringing together experience across diplomacy, governance, and industry, giving it a grounded and practical orientation. The book sets the tone for a broader argument – that the India-China relationship must be approached as a long-term strategic game, spanning economics, science, technology, and diplomacy. Against this backdrop, it advances strategic patience as its central organising principle. It does not advocate passivity, but a policy of deliberate alignment of short-term actions with long-term objectives of domestic reform and sustained economic growth.

This framework is articulated across four interrelated domains. First, the book recognizes the asymmetry in military power, noting that for India, China is a "much-stronger rival" with an assertive posture, and calls for calibrated preparedness. Second, it highlights economic imbalances, including the scale of China's economy – "five times bigger" than India's by 2020 – and the need to address India's domestic productivity and structural constraints. Third, it underscores the role of international coalitions, arguing that India can best manage the challenge "through participating in coalitions" in the short run. Finally, it places emphasis on domestic reform and capability building, including the need to strengthen market institutions, address policy distortions, and build the economic and intellectual capacity required for long-term competition.

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## **From Framework to Practice - Setting the stage for “Taming the Dragon”**

Published nearly five years after *Rising to the China Challenge*, *Taming the Dragon* reflects both continuity and change in India’s thinking on China. The time gap between the two works allows the second book to draw on developments over the intervening years and reassess the China challenge with renewed clarity.

This period has provided a set of practical reference points that inform the book’s approach. Recent conflicts, notably Russia’s war in Ukraine and the recent West Asian war (involving US, Israel and Iran), have influenced how military power is understood today, with greater attention to technology, resilience, and multi-domain operations. Disruptions in global trade have shown that supply chains can act as strategic pressure points, creating a different set of vulnerabilities for some countries and leverage for others. The nature of coalitions has evolved, with countries increasingly shaping partnerships based on their own national priorities rather than fixed alignments. Finally, the idea of positioning India as a key geopolitical partner to the West has also become more grounded, emerging not as a break from the past, but as an effort to leverage and build on existing strengths, such as democratic institutions and economic capacity. These shifts give *Taming the Dragon* a different orientation, while retaining the broad structure of the framework proposed in *Rising to the China Challenge*.

## **Deepening the Framework - From Themes to Tools**

*Taming the Dragon* retains the four-domain structure of the earlier framework, but goes a step further by introducing new concepts, analytical lenses, and policy tools to examine each area in greater depth. This section unpacks these in detail.

### **Military Power**

In *Rising to the China Challenge*, the military theme is framed by first right-sizing the problem. The book situates military capability within a broader set of national strengths - economic scale, technological depth, and institutional capacity. It recognises that China’s advantage is structural and sustained, and therefore argues for long-term capability building in India, aligned with domestic economic growth.

*Taming the Dragon* takes this baseline and develops it into a more detailed and operational assessment on three counts. This analysis is grounded in sustained research, drawing on open-source Chinese material to map the capabilities (across newer vectors such as drones, maritime expansion, and theatre-level planning), doctrine, and evolution of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The book expands the scope of analysis to include cyber warfare, highlighting that the current weak global cooperation in cyber domain, makes offensive cyber operations necessary for a strong defense. The

discussion moves into concrete issues – defence budgeting, acquisition inefficiencies, force integration, and theaterisation – showing how India must align its institutions and resources to build credible capability. The result is a more precise articulation of the same problem: asymmetry is not just to be acknowledged, but managed through prioritisation, integration, and sustained reform.

## **Trade Imbalances**

In *Rising to the China Challenge*, the discussion on India-China trade focuses on understanding the sources of China's export strength: exchange management, labour advantages, and consistent state support. It acknowledges that India cannot replicate this model in full, but still makes a case for targeted state intervention in specific sectors where vulnerabilities are evident. This line of thinking has had some resonance in current policy, including in recent initiatives driving semiconductor manufacturing, and efforts to build domestic capability in critical inputs.

*Taming the Dragon* develops a more structured approach. It starts with a clear position: the objective is to de-risk trade with China, not decouple from it. To do this, it distinguishes trade dependency from vulnerability, noting that not all dependencies are harmful. It then goes further by identifying which vulnerabilities are strategic and which are critical, using defined criteria that assess factors such as substitutability, scale of impact, and potential spillovers. This framework is applied to sectors like organic chemicals, machinery and mechanical appliances, and electrical equipment, showing that risk is uneven and must be assessed case by case.

Based on this assessment, the book suggests targeted responses - reducing exposure in low-value segments such as parts and spares, while building domestic capability in higher-value areas. It also emphasises leveraging external shifts like the China+1 strategy, supported by deregulation and greater competition. The emphasis is on precision and prioritisation, rather than broad restrictions.

## **International Relations**

In *Rising to the China Challenge*, international coalitions are presented as a key policy instrument in addressing the China challenge. The emphasis is on building alliances not only for security balancing, but also to strengthen India's economic and technological base. The book identifies partnerships with major democracies, neighbours, and countries affected by China's rise, as essential for both containing Beijing's assertiveness and accelerating India's own capacity building. Alliances, in this view, are closely tied to India's internal development and its ability to integrate more deeply with the global economy.

*Taming the Dragon* takes a more nuanced approach. It recognises that in the current environment, alliances are less about shared ideology and more about converging interests and flexibility. China is no longer just a bilateral challenge but a broader structural factor shaping global alignments. The book argues that India must pursue parallel tracks - engaging China where interests align, while deepening counter-balancing partnerships where required. It notes that India's response "cannot be one based on binaries" and instead calls for a more adaptive posture. The focus shifts from narrow

self-reliance to broader self-strengthening, achieved through targeted external partnerships in defence, technology, and the economy, alongside calibrated engagement with China. This dual approach is not seen as diluting strategic autonomy, but as the means to expand India's choices and operate effectively in a contested international environment.

## **Brand India**

In *Rising to the China Challenge*, the idea of "Brand India" is approached largely through the lens of institutional reform and the ease of doing business. The book recognises that global firms are looking to diversify away from China, creating an opportunity for India to position itself as an alternative. However, it argues that this opportunity can only be realised if India addresses persistent frictions in its domestic policy environment. Emphasis is therefore on creating a stable, predictable, and investor-friendly ecosystem, where integration into global value chains becomes feasible. Brand India, in this framing, is built through credibility of institutions and consistency of policy.

*Taming the Dragon* takes an extended view of the same objective. It cautions against diluting openness in response to the China challenge. Rather than turning inward, the book calls for deepening openness through people-to-people exchanges, academic engagement, and Track 2 diplomacy. It sees these channels not just as soft tools, but as ways to build independent understanding, shape narratives, and create long-term constituencies for engagement, including with China itself. The argument is that openness strengthens India's positioning globally and enhances its strategic autonomy. In this sense, 'Brand India' is not only about regulatory reform, but also about projecting confidence, accessibility, and intellectual engagement as enduring strengths.

## **Conclusion**

Reading *Rising to the China Challenge* and *Taming the Dragon* together offers a clearer view of how India's thinking on China is maturing. The two books complement each other. As one frames the problem and sets direction, while the other tests and refines that direction against evolving realities. This pairing allows the reader to move from broad principles to practical choices without losing sight of the underlying constraints. More importantly, it highlights that responding to China is not a one-time strategy, but an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and prioritisation.