

BOOK REVIEW

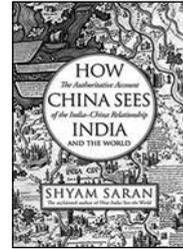
**How China Sees India and the World:
The Authoritative Account of the
India-China Relationship**

Shyam Saran

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Shyam Saran's book *How China Sees India and the World* is an important account of how China perceives India. In the present geopolitical context, the India-China relationship is warming again after an extended period. Recently, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also visited China to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit. In this context, this book becomes more relevant, as it provides a philosophical and historical analysis of the Chinese perspective towards India.

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Saran's knowledge of Mandarin and long diplomatic career dealing with China provide a unique mix of scholarly and practitioner perspectives in the book. From the reader's perspective, a summary after each chapter and a recap after a few chapters is a good way to keep the readers engaged. The book is organised thematically rather than in a strict chronological sequence. The first few chapters explore China's civilisational vision, language traditions, and concept of cultural continuity. The middle sections focus on Tibet, the development of the contemporary Chinese nation, and how history has been selectively interpreted. The subsequent chapters examine how the Communist Party has revised older notions of legitimacy, from the Maoist era to Deng Xiaoping's reforms to Xi Jinping's more nationalist policies.

Saran has highlighted that both India and China are civilisational states with a history of trade and cultural connections. However, those connections have not resulted in a better understanding of each other. He argues that this ignorance is not accidental but deeply embedded in both nations' historical trajectories. He calls for India to invest seriously in the China Studies Programme to bridge the perception gap. It aims not only to understand China but also to understand many historical collections about India within China, which need translation to better understand our past.

Unlike India's pluralist and oral tradition, China followed a standardised written script and strong central authority. This led to the self-image of cultural continuity and exceptionalism within China. The intense focus on history and documentation means that political messages and legitimacy are often drawn and justified by using ancient and philosophical analogies. This is clearly evident in the speeches of Xi Jinping and China's territorial claims in the disputed South China Sea region. With this self-perception hierarchy, orders are always preferred. However, diversity, plurality, and decentralisation are core values in India.

The term *Tianxia*— 'all under the heaven'—situates China at the centre of a morally ordered universe. This worldview is manifested in the tributary system, where foreign envoys offered symbolic deference in exchange for recognition and trade. This worldview still dominates China's diplomacy, which often insists on hierarchy

rather than reciprocity in the relationship. On the basis of the historical analysis, Saran questions the Chinese claims that it was the ancient world's most important and influential civilisation. In fact, he provides evidence to support the idea that India has greater influence than China in Southeast Asia. He also questions Western historians for accepting China's narrative as fact and promoting a linear assumption of history.

Saran provides several examples in the book to show how some instances that do not fit into China's narrative are often downplayed. Moreover, those that do are projected as a central feature or historical fact. Historical setbacks, such as the long Mongol or Machu rule, are either downplayed or reinterpreted through Sinicisation. Even though they were not Han rulers, their period was not included in the 'century of humiliation' when Western power and Japan forced China into an unequal treaty. Xi Jinping's calls for national rejuvenation are based on this narrative to situate China again in the central position as a historical destiny. While questioning these narratives, Saran also skillfully explains how these factors still influence China's foreign policy and its perspective towards India.

Coming to the Chinese view of India, in ancient thought, India was often revered as the Western Paradise (西天) or the land of the Buddha. India's spiritual and intellectual influence on Chinese civilisation was acknowledged during this period. Over the period, Buddhism itself became Sinicised, and its Indian origin became less emphasised.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese thinkers such as Liang Qichao began to see India in a significantly less favourable light, portraying it as a "fallen nation of slaves" under British control. This narrative portrayed "Eastern Civilisation" in ways that frequently ignored India, decreasing its relevance to Chinese self-perceptions. Even Chinese officials shared such prejudices: Zhou Enlai is said to have commented that India was a "bottomless hole," showing profound scepticism about its political and economic capability. Much of this unfavourable picture arose from colonial-era translations of British authors that impacted China's intellectual discourse about India rather than actual cultural exchanges. These views still have an impact on ties today, especially in regard to the

Tibet problem, wherein India is frequently viewed with suspicion. According to Saran, such persistent prejudices emphasise the critical need for comprehensive Chinese studies in India so that the country may understand Chinese narratives independently of colonial-era viewpoints (pp. 158-170).

For India, this gap in perception poses significant risks. Although Indians often view their country as China's equal, Chinese narratives frequently place India in a subordinate position, sometimes with open dismissiveness. Acknowledging and addressing this asymmetry is essential for developing a more realistic basis for engagement.

Saran also discusses how the notion of economic parity has influenced China's perception of India. In the late 1970s, both countries had a comparable Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income. Even a decade later, the gap remained small. When Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988, Deng Xiaoping stated there could be no 'Asian Century' unless India and China rose together. At this point, India was still regarded as a vital partner, not a secondary power.

India's economic reforms in the early 1990s temporarily strengthened this notion. Rapid growth elevated India's global reputation, and in the early 2000s, it was widely regarded as closing the gap with China. From 2003 to 2007, India's growth surged, whereas China's growth slowed marginally. For a brief moment, this expanded India's diplomatic possibilities. It could leverage its links to one major power to bolster relations with others. During this era, China was likewise willing to accommodate India's concerns. It formally recognised Sikkim as a state of India and agreed on a framework for resolving the boundary conflict. China also agreed to parameters such as respecting natural geographical features when drawing borders and protecting the rights of settled populations. These sections reinforced India's position on the McMahon Line and the status of Tawang.

However, this equilibrium began to alter during the 2008 global financial crisis. China's confidence increased as it realised the US was weakening. Even while India maintained 6-7 per cent growth, China attained comparable rates from a much larger base. The resulting asymmetry strengthened Beijing's sense of supremacy. From this

point forward, China became less receptive to Indian concerns. Its influence grew throughout South Asia, and its tolerance for India's increasing links to the United States waned. The pressure on the border also increased after this period.

Even in the informal discussions, Saran notes, Chinese scholars have often remarked that China's GDP was five times that of India. This, they argued, unavoidably impacted the nature of bilateral ties. The underlying message was that India should accept its lower position in the hierarchy and submit to Chinese interests. From this, it is clear that if India can enhance its economic power, China will probably be more accommodating to India's sensitivity.

The book provides an interesting mix of history, culture, and diplomacy, demonstrating how China's self-image impacts its actions and its perceptions of India. The book's strength lies in integrating civilisational histories with contemporary strategy. Additionally, the author's diplomatic insights make the study authoritative and accessible. Some of the readers might find it more descriptive than explanatory.

How China Sees India and the World is highly recommended for researchers and policy-makers. This book not only underlines the perception gaps between the two countries but also challenges some of the core assumptions that China portrays as historical facts.