



Institute of Chinese Studies

SPECIAL SEMINAR

*Interpreting China's
Strategy on the Northern
Borders*

REPORT

Speaker :

Lt. Gen. Prakash Menon

14 September 2023

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Speaker: Lt. Gen. Prakash Menon, Director, Strategic Studies Program and Professorial Fellow, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru.

Chair: Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar, former Ambassador of India to China; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 14 September 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The speaker presented a subjective perspective based on his study and observations, emphasizing the complexity of understanding China's motives and actions. He suggested that a comprehensive understanding requires a unique temporal perspective, which looks into the future and then looks back; which is a challenging approach. To shed light on China's strategy, the speaker examined the connection between China's political objectives and the means it employs, primarily focusing on its military force deployed along the northern borders. He highlighted that the political objectives stem from its engagement in global geopolitics, its aspiration to become the world's leading power and its interactions with the United States and Western allies.

The speaker argued that assessing China's motives involves considering the prevailing relationships between various actors on the global stage. Cooperation, conflict, confrontation, or coexistence between these players shape its interests and influence its policies. Furthermore, understanding China's perspective requires examining the distribution of power and how it perceives the power dynamics between nations. In this context, the speaker highlighted the significance of China's cultural disposition and historical use of force in shaping its approach to international relations and questioned whether and how China's proclivity for using force has evolved over time.

According to the speaker, it is essential to examine how China safeguards and promotes its interests, which are inherently tied to its foreign policy decisions. These policies ultimately serve as a means to achieve its desired ends, which in turn are closely linked to the means at China's disposal. As outlined by the speaker, China's means of exerting power encompass economic, military, and diplomatic tools, all supplemented by intelligence and technological

capabilities. The speaker underscored the PRC's primary goal of influencing the decision-makers' minds on the other side, making the exercise of power fundamentally a psychological endeavour.

The speaker raised a critical question about China's intensified military aggression along its borders, particularly with India, and proposed that this escalation is not solely a bilateral issue but part of a broader geopolitical tension involving the global powers. Due to its size, geographic location, population, and growing power, India plays a significant role in this geopolitical competition. China's actions, including its expansion into the Indian subcontinental neighbourhood, are seen as efforts to contain India within this space. The strategic importance of India's geographic location in the Indian Ocean further complicates this competition. Given the potential strategic threats posed by forces in the maritime arena, China's maritime interests are of paramount concern. The speaker emphasized that India's location in the Indian Ocean can significantly impact China's trade routes and energy supplies, making it a central player in this geopolitical struggle. Moreover, China's military strategy along its northern borders is calibrated to maintain pressure on India and divert its political and military resources. Thus, while China's primary objective appears to deter India from engaging in the broader geopolitical power play, it continues employing small-scale military provocations to achieve this end.

In conclusion, the speaker offered a nuanced perspective on China's strategic behaviour, emphasizing its complexity and the need for India to navigate the geopolitical landscape prudently. He argued that India should remain cautious, avoid aligning with any single camp, and be prepared to respond effectively to China's calculated use of pressure along its northern borders.

Amb. Vijay Nambiar, in his remarks as Chair during the seminar presented a nuanced critique of China's strategic posture toward India, particularly emphasizing the psychological and geopolitical dimensions of its actions. He characterized the ongoing Sino-Indian border tensions as a calculated "mind game"- a long-term effort by China to maintain psychological pressure on India through the use of localized "pinch points" along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). He noted that even a minor military setback could prove disproportionately damaging to China's international image, suggesting that reputational risk might serve as a constraint on Chinese assertiveness. Furthermore, he highlighted China's discomfort with India's global soft power narratives, such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, contrasting them with

China's "shared destiny" rhetoric. He interpreted this as a sign of China's defensiveness in the realm of soft power. Finally, he raised concerns over recent developments in China's defence leadership, including the unexplained disappearance of Defence Minister Li Shangfu, suggesting that such incidents might point to internal dissonance within China's top political and military echelons.

The interactive session raised several key queries regarding China's struggle with soft power, its territorial claims in Eastern Ladakh as well as the need for a more assertive Indian naval posture in the Indo-Pacific.

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