

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*“The Monsoon Asia of
Geographers”: The Cold War
Beginnings of the WHO
Regional Office for South-
East Asia (SEARO), 1948-60*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Vivek Neelakantan

23 July 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Vivek Neelakantan, Medical Historian; and, Brocher Visiting Fellow (2023).

Chair: Prof. Rama V. Baru, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; and, Professor (Retd.), Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 23 July 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- In his presentation, Dr. Vivek Neelakantan examined the Cold War origins and operations of the WHO Southeast Asia Regional Office (SEARO) from 1948 to 1960. He argued that geopolitical tensions fundamentally shaped regional health policies during this formative period.
- The speaker highlighted that SEARO was established in New Delhi in 1948 as the WHO's first regional office. In its early years, SEARO had to navigate the complex dynamics shaped by Cold War tensions in the region. The US aimed to contain the spread of communism in the region, while the Soviet Union opposed the separation of health from economy and society on ideological grounds,, ultimately leading to its withdrawal from the WHO between 1949-1957.
- In the post-World War II era, the US was the largest contributor to the WHO, contributing 40% of the organisation's overall budget and 95% of malaria eradication funding. According to the speaker, such a set-up effectively made the WHO a “captive of US national interests”.
- The WHO Interim Commission conceptualised Southeast Asia as the “Monsoon Asia of geographers”, that is, an epidemiological community defined by the prevalence of common tropical diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, and malaria, with rice-eating populations plagued by nutritional deficiencies, and largely rural societies in need of modern medical intervention.

- The 1955 Bandung Conference presented an alternative vision for regional health policy but was largely ignored by the WHO's disease-focused programmes. Indonesian representatives proposed a holistic approach that emphasised the interaction between disease agents, human hosts, and environmental factors, advocating for environmental sanitation, health education, and addressing social and biological variables rather than focusing solely on disease eradication.
- Dr. Neelakantan noted that there was no distinctive Southeast Asian approach to public health during 1948-1960, except for the smallpox eradication programme (1958-1978), which represented the only regional initiative during this period.
- Prof. Rama V. Baru outlined the evolving structure of the WHO, from its configuration during the Cold War era to the recent withdrawal of funds by the Trump administration, as part of broader efforts to maintain US hegemony.

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