



Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Good Fences Make Good  
Neighbours: Looking at  
India, with China in Mind*

## REPORT

Speaker :  
**Subrata K. Mitra**

*29 November 2023*

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**Speaker:** Prof. Subrata K. Mitra, Adjunct Professor, Dublin City University; and, Emeritus Professor, Heidelberg University, Germany.

**Chair:** Amb. Asoke Mukerji, Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation; and, former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations.

**Date:** 29 November 2023

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

The seminar commenced with the Chair, Amb. Asoke Mukherji, informing the audience about his diplomatic engagements with the Chinese — the WTO, COP21, and UN Peacekeeping Forces and provided examples of India and China working together to realise their mutual interests. The speaker, Dr. Subrata K. Mitra began by clarifying that his presentation was an exercise in shifting away from the sentimentalities of the *Hindi-Chini-Bhai-Bhai*. Instead, he argued that India and China need to engage with each other in a pragmatic structure that allows them to realise their mutual interests, drawing upon political science frameworks, including those of Barrington Moore and Robert Axelrod. He stressed the parallels between India and China, citing more reasons for dialogic collaboration.

Reminiscing about his initial interactions with the Chinese during the 1962 Sino-Indian war and as a student of political science, he also introduced the audience to his first on-ground visit to the country, which informed the speaker's comparisons of India and China. He pointed out that Moore's analysis denied the applicability of the three conventional routes to modernity: capitalism, fascism, and socialism in the case of India, predicting instead a 'peaceful paralysis.' Dr Mitra presented his perspective of India as a "put-together" country with four distinct faces: a modern state with Indian characteristics, governance using minimal force, foreign policy catering to the domestic and international, and endogenous modernity to draw parallels with neighbouring China. For instance, transactional radicalism or providing multiple pathways to good governance has established a modern state with distinctly Indian features. Similar illustrations were provided to help the audience understand the other three faces.

With regard to China, the speaker contended that it was a modern state with Confucian grounding, invisible party rule, foreign policy constrained by domestic interests, and

socialism with Chinese characteristics. Dr. Mitra challenged the convention of presenting India and China in two distinct boxes; the lines separating the categories of democracy and authoritarianism were beginning to blur. Drawing upon his experience in a village in Hebei province, he highlighted Chinese strategic pragmatism, whereby grassroots-level governments were able to mobilise opportunities for self-improvement. This was evident in how the village administration secured funds from Beijing to build a public toilet after foreign delegation visits.

The speaker proposed five recommendations for India to achieve its objectives via its interactions with China. These were: convey Indian strategic autonomy effectively to China; proceed from Western liberalism to Kautilyan realism to protect Indian interests; internalise the *mandala* to project a combination of strength and flexibility; engage the Chinese in composite dialogue and flesh out the suggestion of a two-state solution to resolve the contention over Taiwan. Dr. Mitra justified the potential for cooperation among conflicting partners using Axelrod's observations of the live-and-let-live system in trench warfare where reciprocal empathy can sweeten the deal.

Amb. Mukerji concluded the seminar by reasserting Dr. Mitra's call for strategic autonomy on one's own terms. He also highlighted the rich dialogue that exists between India and China in trade and technology relative to the political sphere. Without treaties, the potential to engineer quantified peace and security also posed an augmented challenge in the Asian environment.

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