



Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*PLA Plan to Construct a  
Railway Line along Aksai-  
Chin Road Linking Xinjiang  
with Tibet: Implications for  
Indian Security*

## REPORT

Speaker :  
**Col. Virendra Sahai Verma (Retd.)**

*14 September 2023*



## REPORT

**Speaker:** Col. Virendra Sahai Verma (Retd.), Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

**Chair:** Mr. M.V. Rappai, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

**Date:** 13 September 2023

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

The seminar commenced with the speaker, Col. Virendra Sahai Verma, elaborating on contemporary global geopolitical changes and recapitulating the existing border issues between India and China. He highlighted the Chinese occupation of Aksai Chin in the 1950s and the subsequent construction of a road connecting Xinjiang and Tibet, which became a key factor leading to the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

According to Col. Verma, the presence of railways in such terrain presented China a significant strategic advantage, especially in enhancing the mobility of PLA troops and armaments along its borders. He elaborated on China's intention of increasing its military and economic power, noting that its dependence on oil poses a challenge – one that the proposed railway line could help mitigate. He argued that it could facilitate the transport of oil and other minerals through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC to reduce the dependency on the existing maritime route in the Indian Ocean. While emphasising these strategic benefits of the proposed railway line, the speaker also acknowledged the limitations that China may face achieving its intended goals.

In light of the current geopolitical situation, the speaker emphasised that while the border dispute in Arunachal Pradesh seems to be non-negotiable, there may be a possibility for compromise in the Aksai Chin region. He argued that it is unrealistic to expect China to vacate and cede the snow-covered desert terrain to India. However, he suggested that through negotiations, India could potentially secure access to the southern part of Aksai Chin – a region that remains strategically important to India to maintain access to Karakoram. The speaker further emphasised on the need for India to gain access to the Karakoram Pass, while highlighting a key complexity: the access passed through a corridor between Pakistan and Aksai Chin, thereby necessitating trilateral negotiations. Moreover, securing this access would facilitate the revival of ancient trade routes that have remained inactive since 1949. Furthermore, the speaker highlighted that the issue of the Dalai Lama remains a bone of contention in India-China relations. In this regard, he argued that China perceived the pro-

Indian Tibetan population as a challenge to its authority. He contended that identifying an alternative source of Buddhist leadership is essential to sustaining India's favourable influence among both the Tibetan population and communities residing along its border with Tibet.

In conclusion, Col. Verma highlighted the need to reassess the threat perception along India's North and Northwestern borders particularly in light of the enhanced logistical capabilities that China's railway infrastructure would provide to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Considering the threat from its western neighbour Pakistan, he argued that India should expedite the planned railway line from Himachal Pradesh to Leh as a response to maintain a military garrison in Ladakh, especially in the event that the Kargil region is blocked by the Pakistani Army.

The Chair for the session, Mr. M.V. Rappai, expressed concerns about the future of India-China negotiations, stressing the need to strengthen domestic capabilities to ensure India can engage from a position of strength. During the seminar, participants raised questions regarding the vulnerability of the proposed railway line to potential Indian airstrikes and China's willingness to negotiate Aksai-Chin – both of which were duly addressed by the speaker.

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