

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Viewing the Present in the
Mirror of the Past: A Search
for New Approaches in the
Study of India-China
Bilateral Relations through
History*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

Dhriti Roy

6 August 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Dhriti Roy, Head and Associate Professor, Department of Chinese, School of Language and Literature, Sikkim University, Gangtok.

Chair: Dr. Madhavi Thampi, former Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi; and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The Wednesday Seminar explored the present dynamics of India–China relations, stressing that they should not be seen in isolation but rather as part of a continuous thread linking the past and present. Dr. Dhriti Roy argued that history, as an interdisciplinary field, has yet to be fully leveraged to understand the complexity of the India-China relations. Through the seminar, Dr. Roy aimed to interrogate the efficacy of the Westphalian theoretical model and explore alternative research methods, tools and approaches.
- The speaker’s argument rested on the premise that the dominant Westphalian theoretical model, which prioritises state-centric, conflict-prone, and security-focused analysis, is inadequate for studying the relationship between the two ancient non-Western polities of India and China.
- Dr. Roy proposed a range of alternative frameworks such as feminist critique of traditional IR theory by Judith Ann Tickner, L.H.M. Ling’s concept of “worldism”, Mahendra P. Lama’s idea of “flexible capillaries”, Baladas Ghoshal’s “geo-civilizational approach”, and Tansen Sen’s concept of “connected history”.
- Dr. Roy questioned whether modern India-China ties are merely about conflict and competition, or if they also reflect a history of shared interests, common civilizational ethos, and mutual sensitivity. To answer this, Dr. Roy delved into a historical survey spanning ancient, pre-modern, and modern periods. She highlighted that from 100 BCE to the 15th century CE, the bilateral relationship was characterised by extensive exchanges driven by non-state actors such as tribes, monks, traders, and missionaries.
- However, the dynamic changed dramatically during the colonial and imperial period. Both India and China were under the influence of foreign powers, and a “third party”, Britain, introduced elements of distrust and exploitation.

- In her concluding remarks, Dr. Dhiriti Roy acknowledged that while a geo-civilizational approach offers an alternative narrative, the Westphalian model is not entirely irrelevant as modern nation-states have become more state-centric and concerned with security and rigid borders. The Chair, Dr. Madhavi Thampi noted the relevance of integrating history, and the role played by non-state actors and borderlands into analyses of contemporary bilateral relations.

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