

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*China and India –
Imponderable Bilateral*

REPORT

Speaker :

Raviprasad Narayanan

17 January 2024

REPORT

Speaker: **Dr. Raviprasad Narayanan**, Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi

Chair: **Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar**, former Ambassador, and Representative of India to the United Nations; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The India-China relationship is fraught with obstacles and has grown rather tumultuous in recent years. The complex nature of the relationship, exemplified in ever burgeoning trade on one hand, and border clashes on the other, provide us an opportunity to explore the relationship through the lenses of deep rooted institutions, social mores, and governance traditions.

Dr. Narayanan expressed the need to examine the complexities of the India-China relationship beyond predictable issues and focus on deep-seated differences. The lecture highlighted the long-standing tensions between the two civilizational entities, rooted in their divergent institutions, governance styles, and social mores. He expressed concern about the limited space for informal dialogue, the pervasive mistrust and hostility, and called for a departure from conventional narratives and approaches, proposing instead a framework aligned with the realities and traditions of both China and India. According to him, the rubric should prioritise sovereignty and non-interference, taking into account the decolonisation process and the evolution of international law.

Dr. Narayanan discussed the historical evolution of India-China bilateral dialogue and highlighted the limitations of past initiatives like The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and the five-point formula of March 2013. His focus was on the challenges in addressing the boundary dispute, particularly the ambiguities surrounding the Line of Actual Control and the necessity for mutual-trust and formal undertakings. He raised questions regarding the suppression of Henderson Brooks committee report and argued for the importance of area studies, which explore social processes within a geographically and historically defined framework, and help in understanding the complex political dynamics between the two nations.

Dr. Narayanan emphasised the limitations of Euro-centric approaches to foreign policy analysis, particularly in the context of China and India. Traditional approaches to international relations have focused on realism, neorealism, constructivism, and behaviouralism. He argues that these approaches fail to account for cognitive factors that have historically influenced state actions, such as religion and cultural influences. He then turned his focus to China and India, highlighting both their significant differences and their shared status as populous nations. He further argues that a one-size-fits-all approach to international relations, prescribed by European and American scholars, does not take into account Asian scholars' perspectives. Chinese scholars, who are often members of the Communist Party of China, are beginning to challenge the dominant international system and proposing alternative approaches.

He also shared anecdotes of historical exchanges between people from the regions, including Ladakh and Persia, highlighting cultural affinities and long standing trade relations. Ultimately, he suggested that understanding the historical context and recognizing the unique identities of these regions might be crucial for effective negotiations moving forward.

Amb. Nambiar discussed several uncertainties shaping China-India relations, including China's construction of a dam near Arunachal Pradesh. India believes that the construction may impact the natural flow of waters relied upon by millions of households. Other imponderables include China's selection of the next Dalai Lama and pressing need for more transparency and open dialogue regarding both countries' health systems. The speakers emphasised the importance of understanding the needs of local people and interests in border areas, encouraging scholarly debates on topics like shadow states and flexible sovereignty for a more comprehensive approach to resolving boundary disputes. One of the speakers suggested involving scholars during the Indian Prime Minister's next term to address the boundary dispute, emphasising the need to include the voices of those who reside in the border and explore diverse regional viewpoints for a practical resolution.

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