

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Deng Xiaoping's Policy  
on Border Issues  
towards India, Russia  
and Japan in  
Comparison with Mao  
Zedong and Xi Jinping*

## REPORT

Speaker :  
**Keiji Ide**

28 February 2024

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**Speaker:** Amb. Keiji Ide, former Japanese Ambassador; Faculty, Graduate School of Rikkyo University, Tokyo; and, Faculty, Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

**Chair:** Mr. Avtar Singh Bhasin, former Director, Historical Division, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

Mr. Avtar Singh Bhasin opened the discussion by drawing attention to the fact that China's border disputes have always been important in determining its diplomacy. He pointed out that China's border policies have gone through significant shifts and evolutions under various leaders. Mao's rigid ideology-driven stance to Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic "shelving" strategy and currently Jinping's more assertive tactics. Each approach reflects the leader's vision for China's future.

Amb. Ide began by elaborating on the Chinese world order which places China at the centre of the world. He focused on various aspects and evolution of border issues of China with India, Russia and Japan and China's evolving border strategies under various leaderships. He pointed out how China's border policy has always been shaped by various factors—its traditional worldview of a Chinese World Order, security needs, economic considerations, control over Tibet, rivalry with Taiwan for legitimacy, and how its leaders viewed friends and enemies. He observed the Chinese tendency to categorize nations as "friends" or "enemies", rooted in traditional dualism of Yin-Yang.

Throughout his presentation, he discussed Chinese policy towards the USSR/Russia, India, and Japan, with particular emphasis on the land-border issues embedded in these policies. Some of his notable observations focused on the evolution of strategies in China across changing leaderships.

Amb. Ide narrated how Mao's policies were marked by aggressive actions, such as the 1962 attack on India which was driven by fury over the Dalai Lama's defection and Tibet-related issues and also spoke about the 1969 attack on Damansky Island against the Soviet Union. He dwelt on Deng Xiaoping's policy of "shelving" disputes to foster a peaceful climate for economic development and how he conceded 1.5 million square kilometers of land during the

1989 China-Russia negotiations, which were finalised in 2004. At present, Chinese have entered a phase where Xi Jinping holds a view that not an inch of territory is to be ceded, making sovereignty a central concern. The discussion highlighted how Deng's strategies secured decades of peace, enabling China's rise, while also noting some of its limitations.

Unlike Mao, who viewed border conflicts as symbols of revolutionary will, Deng approached them pragmatically by prioritising development over confrontation. He inherited unresolved territorial disputes with multiple neighbours at a time when China's focus had shifted decisively towards economic modernisation. Xi Jinping has taken a different path. His focus is on the "Great Revival of the Chinese Nation". Amb. Ide emphasised the need for dialogue and academic exchanges to clarify historical contexts and challenge China's ambiguous territorial claims, which are often rooted in the vague boundaries of the traditional Chinese World Order.

The interactive session raised the point that Deng's approach merely deferred conflicts rather than solving them. Ambassador Ide acknowledged this while arguing that shelving disputes enabled China to secure decades of peace essential for its growth. Amb. Ide expressed optimism about potential India-Russia-Japan cooperation, despite current challenges due to geopolitical tensions. Another question addressed the role of post-Deng leadership in finalising the 2004 Russia agreement to which the speaker responded that while later leaders executed the deal, Deng's policy shift was the key enabler. While responding to a question about whether China's hardline stance is due to its friend-enemy prism or its growing power, Amb. Ide responded that both factors are relevant the friend-enemy prism shapes China's initial approach, but its current power allows it to adopt a more uncompromising stance. Wrapping up, Mr. Bhasin highlighted Deng's real legacy his strategic patience and ability to turn volatile borders into manageable issues, all to advance China's developmental goals. Overall, the seminar offered a compelling look at how leadership choices shape China's foreign policy.

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