

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Line of Riparian Control:
China, India and the
Brahmaputra Basin*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman

17 September 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Dr. Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Nimmi Kurian, Professor, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi; and, Member, External Advisory Board, India China Institute, The New School, New York.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined the complex politics of Himalayan rivers, particularly focusing on the Brahmaputra and Yarlung Tsangpo, highlighting how mainstream narratives often skew perceptions by emphasising absence of treaties, weak institutions and border tensions. Prof. Nimmi Kurian underlined that these frameworks obscure the environmental degradation and extractive pressures shaping the region.
- Dr. Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman highlighted the strategic and ecological dimensions of hydropower development. He emphasised the scale of dam-building by India and China, its socio-environmental impacts and the limitations of existing governance mechanisms, including data-sharing MoUs.
- The discussion underscored the growing importance of adopting a bioregional perspective, incorporating sediment flows, seismic risks, indigenous knowledge and community resilience, rather than viewing river systems solely through national security or infrastructural frames.
- Prof. Kurian emphasised time as a critical dimension, noting that large-scale projects often produce delayed, unevenly distributed consequences, and advocated the integration of “slow violence” as a lens to understand the long-term impact on Himalayan borderlands.
- India’s role as a middle riparian state was emphasised, and the need for transparent and community-inclusive governance, and subnational cooperation was highlighted. Further, the importance of learning from international river management experiences such as the Lower Mekong Basin was also underscored.

- The seminar concluded with reflections on the persistent securitisation of river politics, cultural and bioregional considerations, and the challenges of navigating entrenched bureaucratic and elite-driven frameworks.

Disclaimer: This is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a summary, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).