

Institute of Chinese Studies

# SPECIAL LECTURE

*Staying the Course:  
Understanding China's  
Restrained Reaction to  
the US-Pakistan  
Rapprochement*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

**Ivan Lidarev**

12 March 2026

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**Speaker: Dr. Ivan Lidarev**, Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore; Visiting Lecturer, Sophia University, Bulgaria.

**Chair: Prof. Alka Acharya**, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; Former Professor and Chairperson, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined Beijing's reaction to the recent rapprochement between Washington and Islamabad. Dr. Ivan Lidarev examined China's restrained official response to the US–Pakistan rapprochement, arguing that Beijing's restraint reflects a rational and deliberate strategic calculus rather than indifference.
- The past year has witnessed a significant revival of US–Pakistan relations after nearly a decade of estrangement following the 2011 Abbottabad military operation, and the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This rapprochement has been driven by strong personal chemistry between President Donald Trump and Field Marshal Asim Munir. The renewed relations also encompass a wide range of initiatives, including critical minerals development, the potential development of Pasni port, a major trade deal with a preferential 19% tariff rate, anti-Iran cooperation, and US offers to mediate on Kashmir.
- Dr. Lidarev argued that this rapprochement must be understood not merely as a Pakistani initiative but as part of broader US strategic engagement with South Asia, visible also in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, whose overarching objective is balancing China.
- China's concerns about the rapprochement are real and multi-dimensional. An enhanced US presence in Pakistan could enable Washington to carry out surveillance of Chinese installations, and potentially monitor parts of Xinjiang. Pakistan's

cooperation on critical minerals threatens to erode one of China's most effective instruments of leverage in its trade war with the United States.

- Additionally, closer US–Pakistan ties risk giving Washington access to sensitive Chinese military technology transferred to Islamabad. However, Dr. Lidarev cautioned against exaggerating these concerns, noting that much of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was built during a period of existing American presence in Pakistan. Also, Pakistan's mineral cooperation faces enormous structural obstacles, and American private companies are unlikely to absorb the political and security risks that Chinese state-backed enterprises routinely accept in environments like Balochistan.
- Despite a fierce storm of nationalist outrage on the Chinese internet with prominent voices accusing Pakistan of 'backstabbing' China, the Chinese government responded with consistent and deliberate restraint. Official spokespersons continued to describe the relationship as an 'ironclad friendship', publicly dismissed rumours of Pakistani betrayal as attempts to drive a wedge between the two countries, and maintained active engagement through the formal launch of CPEC Phase II.
- Dr. Lidarev identified structural reasons behind this restrained posture. These include a genuine uncertainty about whether US–Pakistan projects are viable in the long-term; confidence that China retains superior structural leverage through investment, arms dependency, and deep intelligence integration; a judgment that China's core interests in Pakistan including balancing India and accessing the Indian Ocean remain fundamentally unaffected.
- Pakistan's military performance during Operation Sindoor illustrated the depth of Chinese strategic integration, with real-time intelligence sharing and BeiDou satellite navigation access identified as significant contributing factors. The speaker also argued that both Washington and Islamabad are deliberately overstating the strategic significance of their rapprochement for domestic and bilateral purposes, a pattern consistent with Pakistan's long historical practice of overselling its geopolitical

position to attract external support while directing its strategic energies primarily against India.

- The speaker identified four key implications for India. The China-Pakistan strategic axis is likely to persist regardless of Islamabad's improved ties with Washington. A financially stronger and better-equipped Pakistan will intensify its focus on India as its primary strategic adversary. Over time, Pakistan's improved bargaining position *vis-à-vis* China may enable Islamabad to press Beijing toward stronger positions on issues such as Kashmir. A potential silver lining for New Delhi, however, is that growing US-Pakistan ties will inevitably deepen mutual mistrust between Beijing and Islamabad, creating limited but real strategic opportunities for Indian diplomacy.
- In her closing remarks, the Chair, Prof. Acharya, underscored that China's restrained reaction reflects a fundamentally rational calculus: its two primary interests in Pakistan's access to the Indian Ocean and the strategic balancing of India remain unaffected by the rapprochement. Both the speaker and the Chair situated these developments within a broader structural transition from a US-anchored international order toward a competitive and chaotic multipolarity in which alliances are increasingly fluid, established certainties are dissolving, and the risk of strategic miscalculation is materially rising.

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