



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Beyond Idealism:
Making Sense of India's
Advocacy for the PRC's
Security Council Seat in
the 1950s*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

Nabarun Roy

25 February 2026

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Speaker: Dr. Nabarun Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi.

Chair: Dr. Atul Bhardwaj, Visiting Research Fellow, School of Policy and Global Affairs, City St. George's, University of London; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined one of the most contested episodes in Indian foreign policy. It centred on Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's advocacy, in the early 1950s, for securing permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council for the People's Republic of China, despite mounting geopolitical tensions. Dr. Nabarun Roy highlighted India's decision to decline informal offers which suggested that India could itself assume a permanent seat at the UNSC. This paradox has often been explained through the prism of Nehruvian idealism.
- Dr. Nabarun Roy argued that the conventional view that Nehru's support for China was purely moral idealism is reductive and inadequate. In the 1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union floated informal suggestions about India's possible inclusion at the UNSC. The American proposal followed a replacement formula, India in place of the People's Republic of China (PRC), while the Soviet proposal, articulated by Nikolai Bulganin in 1955, suggested India as a sixth permanent member. Nehru showed no serious interest in either. Instead, India actively campaigned for China's rightful inclusion.
- The conventional interpretation attributes India's stance to Nehru's moral idealism, invoking principles of world peace, UN solidarity, and ethical commitments. Dr. Roy argued that reducing the explanation to idealism is irrational. He proposed the International Society perspective as a more rigorous analytical lens, combining elements of realism with a social understanding of international relations.
- Dr. Roy emphasised Nehru's recognition of the PRC as a great power in material terms. Nehru described the PRC as a revolutionary state that had broken conventions,

resented external scrutiny, and remained deeply suspicious due to its history of imperial humiliation. This placed China in the category of a revisionist power, one whose exclusion from global institutions could destabilise the post-War international order.

- According to the speaker, Nehru's thinking was shaped by the failures of the interwar period, particularly the exclusion of significant powers from the League of Nations, which contributed to its collapse. He feared that excluding China from the UN would replicate those mistakes, potentially prompting the USSR to exit as well, thereby destroying the organisation.
- Contrary to portrayals of Nehru as an anti-hierarchical figure, Dr. Roy noted that Nehru supported the UNSC veto provision, considering it a practical necessity to keep great powers anchored to the UN system. Nehru viewed the post-War bipolar order as highly dangerous and unstable. According to him, the 1950s was marked by the crumbling of European alliances and growing rifts among the US, UK, and France. For him, including China in the Security Council was a mechanism to prevent the Cold War from escalating into a hot war.
- The Chair, Dr. Atul Bhardwaj, noted that India in the early 1950s was economically and militarily weak. Nehru understood that India lacked the capacity for an aggressive foreign policy, and his support for China was therefore an act of strategic restraint. Dr. Bhardwaj emphasised the competing Western positions on China, including the British policy of recognising the PRC and the American policy of containment. Nehru largely aligned with the British, making his advocacy for China's UNSC seat a rational geopolitical choice rather than idealism.
- Dr. Bhardwaj further questioned whether American offers to replace China with India were serious, noting that such a move would have shattered the UN, something even the US was unwilling to risk. These offers were likely diplomatic feelers, part of a long-term US strategy to draw China away from the Soviet Union. Dr. Bhardwaj noted that Nehru's worldview was rooted not in idealism but in a commitment to the liberal international order. Excluding China would have undermined the institutional framework Nehru saw as essential for India's developmental ambitions and regional security.

- The seminar concluded by questioning the simplistic ‘idealist’ narrative often associated with Nehru’s China policy. Dr. Roy’s application of the International Society Perspective situated India’s advocacy for PRC’s UNSC seat within a more nuanced understanding of great power management, systemic stability, and the dangers of exclusion, lessons drawn from the catastrophic failures of the interwar period.

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