

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*British Influence on
India's Recognition of
the People's Republic
of China*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

Atul Bhardwaj

11 February 2026

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Speaker: 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.

Chair: Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar, former Ambassador of India to China; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar challenged the conventional narrative that India's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 was driven solely by Jawaharlal Nehru's idealism. Dr. Bhardwaj contended that this decision must instead be situated within the broader geopolitical context, especially in reference to the Anglo-American strategic divergence with regard to China, and British business interests in Hong Kong. As a result, India's decision to recognise the PRC appears more as a move shaped by international dynamics than idealism.
- Britain's support for an early recognition of the PRC was to discourage a complete alignment between China and the Soviet Union. This was also driven by Britain's desire to protect its economic and strategic interests. At the same time, the United States, driven by Cold War ideological imperatives, championed containment. American recognition, therefore, was delayed as a result of Cold War dynamics and domestic political pressures.
- Dr. Bhardwaj argued that the foreign policy-making establishment in India continued to bear an institutional imprint from the colonial period. As a result, the diplomatic outlooks of senior government officers such as K.P.S. Menon and K.M. Panikkar were drawn from British strategic logic, revealing underlying continuities in strategic thought.

- Archival sources indicate that British diplomacy devoted considerable attention to managing perceptions, portraying India as a fully independent actor while simultaneously framing British policy as responsive to the Indian position. This ensured a mutually reinforcing narrative.
- India's decision to recognise the People's Republic of China ahead of the Commonwealth Conference was intended to signal diplomatic independence. At the same time, other Commonwealth nations also recognised the PRC, indicating that India's move was not in isolation, and implied a degree of coordination within the Commonwealth.
- In conclusion, the Chair, Amb. Nambiar observed that Nehru's evolving worldview was significantly shaped by Asianist and civilisational ideas, even as elements of colonial continuity persisted within India's foreign policy framework. This episode indicates a subtle interplay between inherited institutional structures and the gradual assertion of postcolonial agency.

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