



China and India - Duo incommoda vicinorum (Two uncomfortable neighbours)

Speaker: Dr. Raviprasad Narayanan, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

Chair: Dr. Alka Acharya, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

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Venue: Zoom Meeting

The speaker initiated the talk by describing both India and China as uncomfortable neighbours as Westphalian states and also as civilizational expressions. He uses the Latin phrase ‘effectus primatum tenens’ or the effect of primacy holding of territory to describe the Chinese strategy of adding new spots to the dispute table as evident in the recent Galwan Valley dispute. In this context, the speaker noted that till the Galwan skirmishes took place, it was not part of the negotiations between the two countries.

Drawing attention to the significance Galwan Valley holds for China. the speaker pointed that the Galwan river valley is located a height of 4500 meters and positioned at a bend adjoining to the Shyok river and has immense deposits of minerals and rare earth. Among them, is Zirconium, a chemical element used in nuclear reactors. Apart from access to rare earths and minerals, a physical presence in these remote regions, the speaker noted, also allows China ingress into a particular part of Northwestern Ladakh which could put pressure ultimately on India at Siachen. It also wants to hold the Galwan Valley in its entirety because if India has exclusive access to the region (which it had earlier), it would mean that the latter could interdict communications when it comes to a particular road to Xinjiang, the 2342 km long Highway-219, which is also a part of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

To India, the speaker remarked that 1962 has been very decisive in shaping our opinions regarding China and plays a significant role in our decisions with respect to China. In 1962, the Galwan Valley was not claimed by China as was evident in the maps that were exchanged between Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai in 1956 where China claimed the whole of Aksai

Chin (territory captured by China in 1962). The speaker further depicted a continuity in Chinese methodology of ‘Irredentism’ which, according to him, was noticed by politicians of India such as Vice-President S Radhakrishnan and Home Minister Govind Ballabh Pant who were averse to Nehru’s discussions and overtures made to China regarding the boundary dispute. The only takeaway emerging out of talks with Zhou Enlai, according to him, was the setting up of the high-power group which continues to function.

The speaker further argued that internal agenda also plays a role in China’s approach to the border dispute with India, especially with respect to Tibet. He took note of the “quiet changes” made by Xi Jinping with respect to the PLA. Elaborating further, the speaker pointed that the PLA in Tibet is a different division, which has the complete freedom of operation (not under the purview of the Central Military Commission) and only reports directly to Xi Jinping. He also highlighted the sidelining of factions within the Party such as PLA, China Communist Youth League who accused Xi of power appropriations. Thus, according to the speaker, there are strong domestic linkages to events occurring in Galwan because, to the PLA the rare earths in this region is valuable.

With regards to India’s engagement with bilateral and multilateral forums, the speaker is of the view that India should prioritize bilateral relations over multilateralism, where it is insignificant to have a discussion where members do not follow the decisions taken. He gave the example of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where China failed to take a position against Pakistan on terrorism. He further talked about the increasing influence of China in India’s neighbourhood especially in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives and even Madagascar. Moreover, the speaker also posited issues in military supply chains and the effect of acclimatisation among military personnel in high altitude areas. The absence of Indian telecommunication mechanisms and quality transportation that integrates regions such as Ladakh to India should be a serious concern for India, especially given the availability of Chinese smartphones and communication facilities in India’s border villages. The speaker also mentioned a lack of regular patrols by the armed forces to border villages and of effective responses after the information is shared by the citizens.

The talk was followed by a thought-provoking discussion where a wide range of issues was discussed. On the question of Chinese sovereignty claim, the speaker argued that China did not have the claim in 1962 and now they are arguing for sovereignty in new areas. While answering a question on the impact of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’s on perceived sovereignty especially on allowing foreign troops in Indian soil, the speaker mentioned that training should only be conducted in agreements with more than two countries and that should be considered as short-term insurance. On a question regarding China’s intention behind the recent escalations, the speaker answered that a calculated decision-making is happening foreseeing India’s economic rise. With regard to the question on the economic impact of COVID-19 in defence expenditure, the author replied the economic distress has direct implication in defence

expenditure. In this context, India should opt for resolving conflicts diplomatically as a bilateral issue, and both sides need to avoid inviting external actors to involve in the disputes between the two nations. He further argued that the government should convince the media and Opposition on sharing information about developments in the border. Finally, on the question on the impact of Indo-US naval exercise in the South China Sea on the border dispute, the speaker reflected that for the time-being, India should not conduct naval exercises with the US because it will aggravate the situation. A provocation can invite more escalations in the Indian Ocean and Arabian sea where China is stitching new agreements with littoral countries in India's neighbourhood.

This report was prepared by Kannan R Nair, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

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