



## **A War without Winners: Rethinking the 1962 War**

**Speaker:** Dr Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, Lecturer

**Chair:** Amb. Vinod Khanna

Seminar Room, ICS

The Seminar began with speaker Dr. Guyot-Réchar stating that Sino-Indian conflict is complex and has multiple dimensions to it. She pointed out that the standard narrative is about the geopolitical and border dispute between China and India. This narrative of Sino-Indian conflict tends to silence the politics at the ground level which is considered 'low politics'. This mainstream narrative treats Himalayas in the backdrop or as an object of conflict. She said that is not the whole story and that the story should include what happens at ground level. It is important to understand things ground up; the interaction in ground can dictate what happens at the top level. The speaker then looked at the Sino-Indian conflict centrally as the competition to win the hearts and minds of local inhabitants. The speaker spoke in the context of the 1962 war and said that it was not just about obtaining one territory or to teach a military lesson to India, but it was essentially a struggle over people's hearts and minds, a competition to win the loyalty in Himalayas especially in eastern Himalayas. Speaker emphasised that the Sino-Indian conflict should be looked as an interaction of both high and low politics.

Dr. Guyot-Réchar briefly talked about the diversity of Himalayas as an area of increased mobility from both sides. Common people of this region got to observe, compare and choose potentially which side of border was better for living. This led to competition between the two nations. The speaker said that historically in twentieth century neither India nor China had a concrete control over this region. Only after 1950 China and India both postcolonial and imperial polities; aimed to deepen their rule over the Himalayan region.

After 1950 both the states were facing similar problems of state building. To avoid subversion and to hold the region pragmatically there was need of cooperation than coercion. So both India and China was in a competition to win the hearts and minds of the local inhabitants. Speaker noted that before 1959 the competition between India and China was manageable, but with the uprising in Lhasa against China and Dalai Lama's escape to India for the asylum, it led to the rapid disintegration of Sino-India relations - diplomatically and militarily. This led to Sino-Indian competition in North-East Frontier Area (NEFA) and opinion of the local inhabitants was shaped in the run up to the 1962 war.

On 1962 war, the speaker emphasised it to be the fate of two security dilemmas. She said that the 1962 war was the opportunity for India and China to prove themselves as better and more efficient states. The speaker noted, that with China occupying the territory of India, the dire predictions of the Indian administrators that Chinese soldiers will loot and pillage the locals was proved wrong. She pointed out that on the contrary, the Chinese behaved benevolently and went about building roads and improving infrastructure. The demonstration of the superiority of Chinese was extraordinary. So essentially war was a 'Performance', wherein China became the hero by not just winning a military victory but demonstrating itself as a superior state by winning the hearts and minds of the local inhabitants.

Dr. Guyot-Récharde pointed out that this is not the whole story wherein 1962 war is considered as total defeat of India. The speaker said there is another side to this neat narrative, the war didn't turn out the way China had thought. In fact when the Indian officials returned, there was acceptance by local officials for India and local inhabitants put forward their demands for autonomy and development. Neither was there any upheaval by NEFA against India. So, the speaker said that it was a pyrrhic victory for China. Speaker concluded by saying that the war of 1962 had multiple goals and essentially it was a war without winners. The conflict should be looked from a new perspective that is from the arena of low politics and sources that haven't been explored.

*Report Prepared by Aakriti Vinayak, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

### About the Speaker:

Bérénice Guyot-Récharad is a Lecturer in Twentieth-century International History at the King's College London. She is a historian of modern South-Asia and its global and regional environment, with broad interests in: international and transnational relation in the post-colonial world; South Asia and the Indian Ocean; frontiers, borders and borderlands; decolonization; state-making and nation-building.

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