

4th B.N. Mullick Memorial Lecture

"China Challenge: The Way Forward"

Delivered by Ambassador Neelam Sabharwal, New Delhi, February 2026

Introduction

The fourth B.N. Mullick Memorial Lecture was jointly organised by the Association of Retired Senior IPS Officers (ARSIPSO) and the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi, as part of an ongoing lecture series instituted to commemorate the legacy of Shri B.N. Mullick, one of India's most distinguished intelligence professionals. The Memorial Lecture seeks to foster informed dialogue on issues of national security, strategic affairs and governance by bringing together eminent practitioners, scholars and members of the strategic community.

The proceedings commenced with a warm welcome to distinguished guests and members of the Association. The Chair recalled Shri B.N. Mullick's remarkable contribution to India's security architecture. Having joined the Imperial Police in 1942, Shri Mullick later served in the Intelligence Bureau, eventually becoming its Director in 1950 at a comparatively young age. During his unprecedented fourteen-year tenure, he played a central role in shaping India's internal security and intelligence apparatus during the formative years of the Republic and served as the principal security adviser to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. His writings, particularly *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*, continue to remain important reference works on India's early engagement with China and the events leading to the 1962 conflict.

The Association also welcomed members of Shri B.N. Mullick's family, including his granddaughter, acknowledging their presence as a tribute to his enduring legacy. Floral felicitations were extended to the family and to the keynote speaker, Ambassador Neelam Sabharwal. The President of ARSIPSO, in his opening remarks, underscored the contemporary relevance of India–China relations and highlighted the need for informed public discourse on one of the most consequential bilateral relationships in international politics today.

Prior to the keynote address, the Association also released its Annual Magazine (2025), comprising articles contributed by members of ARSIPSO, symbolising the Association's continuing commitment to scholarship and informed public engagement on issues of governance and national security.

Ambassador Neelam Sabharwal, a distinguished member of the Indian Foreign Service (1974 batch), was introduced as the keynote speaker. Her extensive diplomatic career has included assignments as Ambassador to the Netherlands, High Commissioner to Cyprus, Ambassador to UNESCO, and senior diplomatic postings in Beijing, Hong Kong and Washington, besides serving on the China Desk at the Ministry of External Affairs. Drawing upon decades of experience dealing with China, Ambassador Sabharwal delivered an insightful lecture titled

"China Challenge: The Way Forward," placing contemporary India–China relations within their broader historical, strategic and geopolitical context.

Detailed Proceedings

Paying Tribute to B.N. Mullick: A Legacy in National Security

Ambassador Sabharwal commenced her address by paying tribute to Shri B.N. Mullick, observing that it was particularly meaningful to deliver a lecture in his memory after having spent a significant part of her diplomatic career working on China and India–China relations. She noted that Shri Mullick occupied a unique place in India's strategic history, having witnessed and participated in the country's transition from the optimism of the 1950s to the security challenges culminating in the 1962 conflict.

She highlighted that Shri Mullick's contribution extended beyond intelligence gathering. As Director of the Intelligence Bureau during India's formative years, he played an instrumental role in developing the country's nascent intelligence infrastructure, strengthening frontier administration, understanding developments in Tibet, and advising political leadership during an exceptionally complex period. His writings, particularly *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*, continue to provide valuable insights into the evolution of India's China policy and the institutional constraints confronting newly independent India. Rather than viewing the book merely as a defence of official decisions, Ambassador Sabharwal described it as a historically significant account that has, over time, been validated by subsequent scholarship.

She argued that contemporary assessments of India's early China policy often overlook the severe institutional and resource limitations prevailing during the 1950s. India was simultaneously engaged in building democratic institutions, developing frontier infrastructure and establishing security capabilities, all within severe financial and administrative constraints. In this context, many decisions that appear questionable in hindsight were taken under circumstances of considerable uncertainty.

Historical Evolution of India–China Relations

Turning to the broader trajectory of bilateral relations, Ambassador Sabharwal described the 1950s as a period characterised by extraordinary optimism. India and China were viewed as two newly independent Asian civilisations emerging from colonial domination and seeking to shape a new international order based on solidarity among developing countries.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru strongly believed in Asian cooperation, peaceful coexistence and multilateralism. India championed China's admission to the United Nations at a time when the People's Republic of China remained diplomatically isolated and represented neither in the UN nor in the Security Council. According to Ambassador Sabharwal, these policies reflected genuine conviction rather than strategic expediency.

However, the optimism underpinning the Panchsheel Agreement and the slogan "Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai" gradually gave way to growing strategic mistrust. Developments in Tibet, differing

perceptions of the boundary and contrasting strategic cultures steadily eroded confidence. She observed that although more than six decades have passed since the 1962 conflict, the trust deficit created during that period has never been fully overcome and continues to influence bilateral relations even today.

Reassessing the 1962 Conflict

A substantial portion of the lecture focused on revisiting the events preceding the 1962 India–China War. Ambassador Sabharwal cautioned against simplistic historical narratives that attribute the conflict solely to failures of political leadership or military preparedness. She argued that India's understanding of China during the 1950s was shaped by assumptions that both countries shared similar commitments to international law and peaceful dispute resolution.

In contrast, China approached strategic affairs through a fundamentally different historical experience, informed by prolonged revolutionary struggle, military consolidation and geopolitical realism. This mismatch in strategic cultures contributed significantly to India's misreading of Chinese intentions.

Ambassador Sabharwal drew extensively upon Shri B.N. Mullick's writings to explain how Chinese diplomacy consistently reassured Indian leadership that border differences were either minor or non-existent, even while consolidating its position on the ground. She described this pattern as an early manifestation of what later came to be recognised as "salami slicing"—the incremental alteration of facts on the ground through gradual territorial advances without provoking full-scale conflict.

She also discussed India's inability to influence events in Tibet. Despite India's historical and cultural links with Tibet, diplomatic appeals to major powers failed to generate meaningful support. Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States each pursued their own strategic interests, leaving India with limited diplomatic options. In retrospect, she suggested, many criticisms directed at Indian leadership underestimated the complex international environment within which policy decisions had been made.

Continuity in Chinese Strategic Behaviour

Moving from history to the present, Ambassador Sabharwal argued that certain characteristics of Chinese strategic behaviour have displayed remarkable continuity over time. She observed that Beijing has consistently sought to pursue long-term geopolitical objectives through incremental advances, calibrated pressure and strategic ambiguity.

She cited the gradual construction of infrastructure in disputed areas during the 1950s and the subsequent public assertion of territorial claims as early examples of this approach. Similar patterns, she argued, continue to be evident in contemporary disputes, including developments along the Line of Actual Control.

The 2020 Galwan incident, in her assessment, represented not an isolated episode but part of a broader strategic continuum. While disengagement measures and diplomatic dialogue have reduced immediate tensions, the border remains heavily militarised, and the underlying strategic differences remain unresolved. The experience reinforced the importance of maintaining constant vigilance, strengthening border management mechanisms and avoiding complacency regarding Chinese intentions.

China's Rise and the Changing Strategic Environment

Ambassador Sabharwal noted that the strategic environment confronting India today differs fundamentally from that of earlier decades. China has emerged as a global economic and technological power with capabilities that significantly exceed those of most countries across multiple sectors.

This growing asymmetry has important implications for India's foreign policy. China possesses substantial influence over critical global supply chains, advanced manufacturing, rare earth minerals and emerging technologies. These capabilities increasingly provide Beijing with instruments of economic statecraft alongside traditional military power.

She observed that India's own economy remains substantially dependent on imports of critical intermediate goods, industrial components and strategic minerals from China. Sectors such as electronics, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals and electric vehicles continue to rely significantly on Chinese supply chains. Consequently, economic interdependence has become an important dimension of bilateral relations, requiring careful management rather than simplistic disengagement.

Balancing Competition and Engagement

One of the central arguments advanced during the lecture was that India cannot afford either complete confrontation or unquestioning accommodation. Ambassador Sabharwal emphasised that the challenge lies in pursuing principled engagement while firmly safeguarding national interests.

She welcomed recent diplomatic efforts aimed at restoring communication following the easing of border tensions but stressed that normalisation should not imply abandoning unresolved concerns. India should continue to engage China on issues including border management, trade imbalances, market access, investment, confidence-building measures and multilateral cooperation while simultaneously strengthening domestic capabilities.

Diversification of supply chains, technological self-reliance and sustained economic growth were identified as essential prerequisites for enhancing India's long-term strategic autonomy. She argued that India's ability to negotiate with China would increasingly depend upon its own economic and technological strength rather than purely military considerations.

China–Pakistan Nexus and Regional Geopolitics

Ambassador Sabharwal devoted considerable attention to China's enduring strategic partnership with Pakistan. She described this relationship as one of the principal structural challenges confronting Indian foreign policy. China's investments under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, together with sustained strategic cooperation, have expanded Beijing's stake in regional security dynamics.

She further observed that China's growing engagement with South Asian countries reflects a broader effort to consolidate influence within India's immediate neighbourhood. At the same time, China remains cautious regarding India's expanding partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia and other Indo-Pacific partners.

Against this backdrop, Ambassador Sabharwal argued that India must continue pursuing a diversified foreign policy that preserves strategic autonomy while strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries. Rather than viewing international relationships in zero-sum terms, India should cultivate multiple avenues of cooperation consistent with its long-term national interests.

Discussion

The lecture was followed by an engaging interactive session during which participants from diplomatic, military and security backgrounds offered observations and posed questions on contemporary India–China relations.

Several participants emphasised the growing significance of the China–Pakistan strategic partnership and sought Ambassador Sabharwal's assessment of its implications for India's national security. Others questioned whether China's military capabilities had been overstated and argued that India's improved infrastructure, enhanced military preparedness and favourable geography significantly strengthened its deterrence posture.

In responding, Ambassador Sabharwal acknowledged India's growing military capabilities while reiterating that strategic competition with China extends far beyond conventional military power. Economic resilience, technological capacity, diplomatic engagement and long-term strategic planning would collectively determine India's ability to manage relations with a rising China.

She also stressed that diplomacy should not be interpreted as weakness. Rather, sustained dialogue, combined with military preparedness and economic strengthening, represents the most prudent approach for managing a relationship characterised simultaneously by competition, cooperation and interdependence.

Conclusion

The Fourth B.N. Mullick Memorial Lecture offered a nuanced and historically grounded assessment of India's evolving relationship with China. Drawing upon decades of diplomatic

experience and careful historical reflection, Ambassador Neelam Sabharwal argued that contemporary policy must be informed by a clear understanding of the lessons of the past while remaining responsive to emerging geopolitical realities.

The lecture underscored that the legacy of 1962 continues to shape strategic thinking, but equally highlighted the necessity of avoiding both historical fatalism and strategic complacency. India must engage China from a position of confidence, combining military preparedness with economic resilience, technological advancement and sustained diplomatic engagement.

Echoing the legacy of Shri B.N. Mullick, the lecture concluded with the recognition that India's response to the China challenge should be characterised by strategic patience, institutional strength and unwavering commitment to safeguarding national interests. Rather than seeking immediate or simplistic solutions, India must continue to play the long game—remaining realistic, resilient and prepared to navigate one of the defining geopolitical relationships of the twenty-first century.