



Border Disputes and Strategic Implications: Unveiling the Arunachal Pradesh Conflict and Its Impact on Sino Indian Border

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ABSTRACT

The Arunachal Pradesh conflict, a longstanding border dispute between India and China, has significant strategic implications and poses a complex human challenge. This research delves into the multifaceted nature of the conflict, examining its historical roots, geo-strategic importance, and security policies and implications.

The analysis employs a framework incorporating critical border studies and environmental security to explore the conflict beyond territorial claims. It sheds light on the social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities faced by border communities, and investigates the potential for resource anxieties to exacerbate tensions.

Through in-depth analysis of data collected from diverse sources, including interviews with local stakeholders, archival documents, and policy analyses, the research unveils the human cost of the conflict and the crucial role of community voices in peacebuilding efforts.

Furthermore, the research explores the potential for community-driven conflict resolution approaches and sustainable resource management practices to contribute to long-term peace and stability in the region. By bridging the gap between research and policy, the findings aim to inform stakeholders and policymakers in developing effective strategies for addressing this ongoing geopolitical issue.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh conflict, Sino-Indian border dispute, critical border studies, security policies and implications, Tawang conflict and resolution, Geo strategic importance.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The simmering border dispute between India and China over Arunachal Pradesh has cast a long shadow over regional stability for decades. Beyond the strategic implications and territorial claims, the conflict exacts a significant human cost on local communities residing in the contested region. This research paper delves into the

multifaceted nature of the Arunachal Pradesh conflict, employing a framework that incorporates critical border studies and security policies. By analyzing diverse data sources, including interviews with local stakeholders, archival documents, and policy analyses, the research investigates the social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities faced by border communities. This paper argues that understanding the lived experiences of these communities and their role in peacebuilding efforts is crucial for fostering long-term stability in the Arunachal Pradesh region

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The roots of the Arunachal Pradesh conflict stretch back centuries, with both India and China laying historical claims to the territory. British India established administrative control over the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the 1914 Simla Convention that defined the McMahon Line as the border between British India and Tibet. However, China never formally ratified this agreement. Following India's independence in 1947, it inherited the claims to Arunachal Pradesh, which it considers an integral part of its territory. The situation escalated in 1962 when a brief border war erupted between India and China, with China occupying parts of Arunachal Pradesh before withdrawing unilaterally. Since then, the border has remained a source of tension, with periodic incursions and military buildups on both sides. The unresolved historical claims and lack of a formal border agreement continue to fuel the conflict in the present day.

The Arunachal Pradesh conflict is a complex issue with historical roots stretching back centuries. Both India and China possess claims to the territory, based on a mix of historical interactions, cultural influences, and strategic considerations.

Early Interactions and Shifting Control:



- **Early Kingdoms and Tibetan Influence:** For centuries, various local kingdoms existed in the region, with some acknowledging Tibetan suzerainty. Tibetan influence waned in the 18th century, paving the way for greater autonomy for these kingdoms.
- **British Colonial Expansion:** In the late 19th century, British India embarked on an expansionist policy in the northeast, seeking to secure its borders and establish trade routes. Through a series of expeditions and treaties with local rulers, they gradually established control over the region, which they named the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

The McMahon Line and its Legacy:

- **The Simla Convention (1914):** A pivotal event occurred in 1914 with the Simla Convention, a tripartite conference between British India, China's Qing Dynasty, and Tibet. The British representative, Henry McMahon, proposed a boundary line separating British India from Tibet, now known as the McMahon Line. While Tibet signed the agreement, China refused to do so, sowing the seeds for future disputes.
- **Post-Colonial Transitions:** Following Indian independence in 1947, India inherited British claims to the NEFA, including Arunachal Pradesh. China, under the newly established People's Republic, continued to reject the McMahon Line.

Escalation and the Sino-Indian War:

- **Early Tensions and Border Skirmishes:** Disagreements over the border simmered throughout the 1950s, leading to minor skirmishes between Indian and Chinese forces.
- **The 1962 War:** Tensions escalated significantly in 1962, culminating in a brief but bloody border war. China launched a surprise attack, capturing large swathes of Arunachal Pradesh before unilaterally withdrawing. The war exposed the fragility of the border situation and highlighted the potential for wider conflict.

The Post-War Stalemate:

- **Unresolved Dispute and Continued Tensions:** The 1962 war failed to resolve the border dispute. Despite periods of relative calm, tensions continue to flare up, with occasional incursions and military buildups along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between India and China.
- **The Issue of "One China" Policy:** China's insistence on India accepting its

"One China" policy, which considers Taiwan a renegade province, further complicates border negotiations.

SECURITY POLICIES AND IMPLICATION:

The Arunachal Pradesh conflict significantly impacts and is shaped by the security policies of both India and China.

Indian Security Policies:

- **Forward Defense Policy:** India's forward defense policy aims to maintain a strong military presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to deter Chinese incursions. This involves deploying troops in strategically important locations and building infrastructure to facilitate troop movement.

• **Border Infrastructure Development:** India has undertaken significant infrastructure development projects along the border, including roads, bridges, and airbases. This aims to improve logistical support for troops stationed there and enhance India's military preparedness.

- **Military Modernization:** India is actively modernizing its armed forces, focusing on acquiring advanced weaponry, communication systems, and surveillance technologies. This aims to bridge the perceived gap in military capabilities with China.

• **Strategic Partnerships:** India has forged closer strategic partnerships with other countries, such as the United States and Japan, to counter China's growing military influence in the region. These partnerships involve joint military exercises and defense technology cooperation.

Security Implications of these Policies:

- **Increased Militarization:** The focus on forward defense and military modernization has led to a heightened military presence along the LAC. This can escalate tensions and increase the risk of accidental clashes between Indian and Chinese troops.

• **Infrastructure Impact on Environment:** Infrastructure development projects have raised concerns about environmental degradation in the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. This can lead to local grievances and contribute to instability in the border region.

- **Resource Strain and Economic Costs:** Maintaining a strong military presence and pursuing modernization programs place a significant strain on India's resources. This can divert funds from development projects and other social welfare programs.



Chinese Security Policies:

- **Undisputed Territory Claims:** China maintains a hardline stance, refusing to acknowledge Indian claims to Arunachal Pradesh and considering it an integral part of its territory. This fuels tensions and makes compromise difficult.
- **Military Buildup and Assertiveness:** China has also undertaken significant military buildup along the LAC, including deploying advanced weaponry and conducting military exercises. This assertiveness is perceived by India as a threat to its territorial integrity.
- **Dual Use Infrastructure:** China has invested in infrastructure development along the border, ostensibly for civilian purposes. However, these projects also have potential military applications, raising concerns about China's long-term intentions.

Security Implications of Chinese Policies:

- **Escalation of Tensions:** China's military buildup and assertive behavior contribute to a climate of fear and suspicion. This increases the risk of miscalculations and accidental clashes along the LAC.
- **Regional Instability:** The unresolved border dispute and heightened military presence threaten regional stability. It raises concerns about a wider conflict between India and China, with potential repercussions for other countries in the region.
- **Impact on Local Communities:** The militarization of the border region can hurt local communities. It can restrict their movement, disrupt traditional livelihoods, and raise anxieties about their safety.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT:

India has been focusing on development in all aspects as it aims to become a \$ 5 trillion economy. Last month, the Arunachal government signed an MoU with the National Highway Logistics Management Limited for infrastructure development in the state. The Indian government has also been ramping up its infrastructure along the border areas in the northeast.

China is investing in construction along the borders as well. "This is not a small incident, because there is a huge mobilization and both sides were expecting some kind of flashpoint since the Galwan incident. If you look at the kind of arrangements they have been making, this is mind-

boggling — \$23 billion of investment according to the 14th five-year plan in Tibet alone, specifically in terms of road construction and air base construction. We need disengagement and de-escalation in many of these areas if peace were to come back to China and India," said Srikanth Kondapalli, professor, of China studies, at JNU.

Einar Tangen, a Political Affairs Commentator, in Beijing, had another take, terming the recent Arunachal clashes as minor. "As I said, they are very concerned about the issue with the United States, they are concerned about Taiwan, they are not interested in opening up more issues on their borders. So it doesn't make sense from that perspective, either economically, politically, or militarily," he said.

HINDI INFLUENCE IN THE STATE:

the people of Arunachal Pradesh are more averse to speaking in Hindi than any of the other Northeastern states. The Indo-Sino war can be seen as one of the reasons why the language is so common in the state — the locals would have to converse in Hindi with the Army, which also helped with the opening of hospitals, schools, etc in the state.

TAWANG AND ITS CONFLICT:

Nestled high in the eastern Himalayas, Tawang, a picturesque district of Arunachal Pradesh, finds itself at the crossroads of geopolitical contestations between India and China. With its towering peaks, ancient monasteries, and unique blend of cultures, Tawang has become a focal point of strategic, political, and territorial contestations between the two Asian giants. Tawang's significance in the geopolitical chessboard dates back to the early 20th century when the McMahon Line was drawn, demarcating the border between British India and Tibet. Post-independence, China rejected this line, leading to territorial disputes and, eventually, the 1962 Sino-Indian war, a watershed moment in the history of both nations, has significantly shaped the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations and left a lasting impact on the geopolitical landscape of the region. The lingering border issue has left Tawang at the center of diplomatic tensions, with both nations claiming sovereignty over the territory.

At the heart of Tawang lies the Tawang Monastery, a sacred seat of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the largest monasteries globally. This ancient institution, with its golden spires and rich tapestry of Buddhist art, serves as a cultural and spiritual focal point for the region. Beyond its



cultural and historical importance, Tawang holds strategic value due to its proximity to the disputed border and its elevation, offering a commanding view of the region. The disputed border in Tawang has been a source of periodic tensions and military standoffs. Both nations have fortified their positions, with the border areas witnessing occasional skirmishes. The 1962 war and subsequent conflicts have left an indelible mark on the security landscape of Tawang. The military postures of both nations in the region reflect the strategic imperative they place on securing this high-altitude terrain. There was a face-off between the Indian Army and the PLA in the Yangtse sector of Tawang as recently as December 2022.

While efforts have been made to improve infrastructure, connectivity, and socioeconomic conditions, the unresolved border dispute has sometimes hindered comprehensive development initiatives. Over the years, the Indian government has initiated various developments in Tawang to address infrastructural, economic, and social needs. Balancing the needs of the local population with strategic imperatives is a delicate task, as infrastructure projects and economic development can become entangled with geopolitical considerations. New Delhi is actively advancing infrastructure development in Arunachal, undertaking projects from road construction to establishing a new airport. The focus is on accelerating infrastructure initiatives, with a particular emphasis on border linkages, and the central component of these efforts is the Arunachal Frontier Highway. Tawang's tourism potential remains immense, offering visitors breathtaking landscapes, cultural experiences, and the tranquillity of its monastic heritage. The economic opportunities tied to tourism could be a catalyst for sustainable development, provided these initiatives are navigated judiciously, considering both environmental and cultural sensitivities.

As Tawang continues to be under the shadow of India-China tension, the path forward involves nuanced diplomacy, sustained dialogue, and a commitment to finding peaceful resolutions. Recognizing the cultural significance of the region, fostering local development, and addressing security concerns are integral to charting a course that respects the people's aspirations while navigating the complexities of the broader geopolitical landscape.

GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH:

Arunachal Pradesh, the 24th state of India, covers the largest geographical space among the eight sisters of the Northeast having geostrategic importance in the 21st century. It shares international borders with Myanmar (520 km), China (1,080 km), and Bhutan (217 km). Here, the term geo-strategic is not narrowly defined in terms of a counterweight, but it is largely understood in a broader perspective by locating three geo-economic corridors to strengthen our cross-border relations as well as promote India's national interest vis-a-vis Myanmar, Bhutan, and China as well.

Nampong: Geo-economic corridor to ASEAN:

Nampong, which is situated in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, could be a potential geo-economic corridor to uphold India's economic interest with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

India has renovated its portion through two-lane highways, while China has renovated its segment through six-lane highways. If the Myanmar segment is completed, then Nampong can be connected to Muse, Lashio, Mandalay and Yangon (Myanmar) through Asian Highway (AH) 14, Ruili, Wanding and Kunming (China) through AH 3, and Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore (Singapore) through AH 2, and further to Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) of the Greater Mekong sub-region through AH1.

It is pertinent to mention here that the road distance calculated between Nampong-Mandalay-Yangon (1428.2 km), Nampong-Bangkok (2091.1 km), Nampong-Kuala Lumpur (3436.7 km), Nampong-Singapore (3795.2 km), Nampong-Phnom Penh (2737.1 km) and Nampong-Hanoi-Hochi Minh (3066.6 km) is quite a feasible proposition in terms of cost-benefit analysis, as compared to the trans-shipment of goods to Southeast/East Asia from the Northeast via the Kolkata port, passing through the Siliguri corridor. The development of Nampong LCS would promote sub-regional /regional cooperation, and it would generate opportunities for Arunachal Pradesh to collaborate with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum on multiple fronts.

Tawang: Geo-Economic Corridor to Bhutan:

Tawang, which is situated in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, could be a potential geo-economic corridor for Bhutan to reinforce



India's economic interest in the neighborhood. Given the strategic importance of the place, Tawang-Lumla (Western Arunachal Pradesh) -Trashigang (Eastern Bhutan) roadways should be developed to boost economic growth and development in the region. It would not only give quick access to Guwahati, and Assam but it would also give passage for cross-border cooperation in the region.

Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan have many commonalities in the field of ecology and natural resources and they could be mutual partners in the field of hydropower generation, tourism, food processing, and beverage industries. Beyond this, the development of cross-border trade and cooperation in the Indo-Bhutan sector would pave the way for sub-regional cooperation based on shared ideas materializing through a multitude of partnerships. Further, such kind of cooperation would subsequently strengthen the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) as well.

Kibithoo: Geo-Economic Corridor to China:

Kibithoo which is situated in the Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh at an altitude of 4,070 feet above sea level enjoys geo-economic advantages to be developed as an all-weather road to the Tibet Autonomous Region, Sichuan and Yunnan of China. It would provide shorter and faster access to the Indian industries to tap the southwestern and southeastern Chinese markets.

The proposed geo-economic passage would counter Chinese penetration into the region while reinforcing India's strategic significance along the McMahon line. It is relevant to mention here that China has already built up several infrastructure projects along the international boundary, nearer to Arunachal Pradesh. So India should lay thrust on the 1800 km frontier highway along the international boundary running parallel to China to connect the border areas.

Moreover, the development of Kibithoo as an entrepot would give a chance to both India and China to switch their priorities from security to trade or economic collaborations based on sustainable engagement paradigms. But the question arises on how Arunachal Pradesh can be placed in the larger canvas of free trade architecture to take hold of the opportunities in the India-China sector given the nature of Chinese intransigence over the McMahon line. To make it very clear, any cross-border initiative is to be based on mutual compatibilities, but not on the contradictions or

hegemony to shape any sub-regional/regional architecture. The unilateral Chinese position would only foment trouble between the two Asian giants and would inhibit the peace and tranquillity of the region. India and China being emerging global powers can shape the destiny of the 21st Asian century through mutual harmony and shared partnership. Hence, proactive dialogues along with strategic preparedness are to be sustained for cross-border engagement between India and China. What is required at this stage is a joint Indo-China effort to transform this geo-strategic zone into a geo-economic zone for a win-win situation.

II. CONCLUSION:

The unresolved border dispute over Arunachal Pradesh stands as a persistent obstacle to a fully cooperative relationship between India and China. China's claims on Arunachal Pradesh go beyond territorial expansion; they have strategic implications for regional dominance, access to crucial water resources like the Brahmaputra River, and the ability to potentially encircle India's vulnerable northeastern states. This lingering dispute has not only triggered military standoffs and heightened tensions, but it has also significantly impacted the lives of local communities residing in the disputed zone. These communities face constant security concerns, limitations on development due to restricted infrastructure projects, and disruptions to traditional practices that often cross the undefined border.

However, there is still hope for a peaceful resolution. Continued dialogue between India and China, focusing on confidence-building measures and exploring areas of economic cooperation in non-sensitive sectors, can pave the way for a more stable border. This process can be further strengthened by empowering local communities. Government initiatives focused on development along the border can not only improve the quality of life for residents but also strengthen their connection to the region, fostering a sense of national identity that counters China's narrative. Additionally, promoting regulated trade posts and cultural exchange programs can create economic opportunities and build trust between communities across the border.

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