China's Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh - The North East Frontier State of India

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In a recent development, to bolster its claims in Arunachal Pradesh, the North eastern state of India, which the Chinese refer as Zangnan or South Tibet, China has built a village in November 2020 across the alignment of LAC (Line of Actual Control) inside Indian side of border on the banks of River Tsari Chu in Upper Subhansiri district and upheld its position that they say is clear and consistent as they have never recognised Arunachal Pradesh as part of India. The construction of the settlement has been seen by Indian analysts as a move to reinforce China's claim to the area, and part of a broader push by China to build civilian settlements in disputed frontier areas, which it has also done in Doklam with Bhutan.

The Republic of India, with its 1.3 billion population, is the most populous democracy in the world and the fourth-strongest nation in conventional military terms with over 1.4 million active frontline armed forces personnel. India is not at peace with its neighbours as it has its considerable share of geopolitical contestations at its borders that entails Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, is a socialist democracy wherein only one political party, that is, Communist Party of China is a central authority, and in sheer military power, China stands as the third strongest nation on earth. With closed political ideology; robust economic strategy, strong military power, expansionist designs and ambition to become a world power, China formulates fear and concerns for India. The prominent bones of contention are the border conflicts, water disputes, India's concerns over the passage of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), China's agitation over providing shelter to His Holiness The Dalai Lama and his continued stay in India and on a larger geopolitical perspective, an ongoing race between the two countries to gain ascendency in the South Asian region.

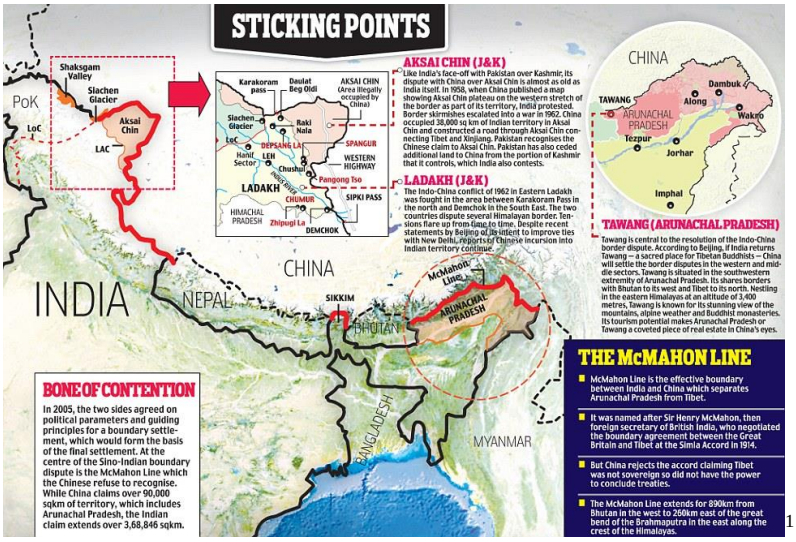
The central theme of this paper is the border dispute between two Asian giants with a focus on China's claims to the territory of Arunachal Pradesh. This mountainous state is considered mysterious, magical and mystical and is tucked away in Northeast of India where the God has bestowed best of his blessings to its people, flora and fauna. However, India's sovereign state faces a significant challenge from China that lays its territorial claim on this massive land up to the northern bank of the mighty river the Brahmaputra, the origin of which is from Mansarovar lake region near Mount Kailash in China.

The border dispute between the two countries dates back to the early 20th century when Tibet, China and British Indian leaders sat down in Shimla Convention in 1913-14 to draw the Sino-Tibet and Indo-Tibet boundaries; to devise the plan to divide Tibet into 'Inner Tibet' and the "Outer Tibet", and to decide over the suzerainty of China over Tibet. Sir Henry McMahon, the chief negotiator, proposed a boundary between Tibet and India, came to be known as the 'McMahon Line' demarcating Tibet and North-east of India. The **McMahon Line** runs from Bhutan's eastern border along the watershed of the Himalayas until it reaches the great bend in the Brahmaputra River where it emerges from its Tibetan course into the Assam Valley, thus extending about 1150 Kilometres.

The Chinese representative reluctantly initialled the Shimla Convention; however, it was refuted later by the Chinese government. China thus did not officially recognize the boundary between India and Tibet and its legal status is still disputed by the Chinese government. The McMahon Line was forgotten after Shimla Convention until 1935, when British civil service officer Olaf Caroe convinced the British government in India to publish the Shimla Convention and use the McMahon Line on official maps.

In 1950 China annexed Tibet and laid claims on **Arunachal Pradesh**, the North Eastern Frontier State (NEFS) of India, which they called '*Zangnan'*, the South Tibet, as part of their country. The irony is that India became the second non-communist country to recognize China's claim on Tibet. Given their claims on the NEFS, India still wanted to hold cordial relationship with China as it was side-lined in most of the world forums which led to the signing of agreement known as *"Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence"* also known as *"**Panchsheel Agreement**"* in 1952. Under this agreement, India claimed China's authority over Tibet and proposed peaceful coexistence between India and China. In 1959, Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader, fled Tibet and came to India, which corresponded to dispute in the Lhasa region of Tibet, and China alleged that India proliferated the strife in the region.

In 1962, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) infiltrated India to claim the Aksai-Chin region in the north of India which according to them was part of Xinjiang as also Arunachal Pradesh that they referred as South Tibet. The conflict famously known as **Sino-India war** was fought on the world's most challenging terrains, the Karakoram Mountains in the Aksai Chin and Ladakh regions and Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh. The four-week-long war left thousands of soldiers dead. China seized about 43,000 sq. km. in Arunachal Pradesh but then retreated after a ceasefire declaration. One of the most critical determinants for the Sino-Indian War was China's view of India as a threat to its rule of Tibet. The two countries were unable to negotiate on an official boundary, so a provisional ceasefire was negotiated along an undefined border identified as the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** running across the Northern Sector (region of Aksai Chin and Ladakh in North India), Central Sector (states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand) and Eastern Sector (covering the states of Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast of India) covering about 3488 Kilometres.



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Even though several agreements have been signed and agreed for peaceful coexistence post-Sino-India war of 1962, border disputes and skirmishes have never stopped. 1966 Agreement prohibits the use of guns and explosives near the border to avoid the escalation of conflict and to control the skirmishes; 1993 Agreement proposes the maintenance of the peace of tranquillity and acceptance of LAC demarcating the boundary as a critical feature; 1996 Agreement is about building Confidence Building Measures (CBM), and 2003 Agreement is on 'Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation'. However, these agreements and CBM could not prevent Doklam Standoff in 2017 and Galwan Valley conflict in June 2020, the two most recent events that depict that there are frictions along the border. These agreements are purposeless till the time both countries do not uphold and agree on LAC.

The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh holds 1.8 million population and is an integral and inalienable part of India. The state has an amalgam of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Burmese cultures. However, it has never been recognised as a state of India by Beijing as China claims it as part of South Tibet region thus creating contention. China always quotes the strong Buddhist ties between Tibet and India, that is, between Lhasa and Tawang Monasteries for the past few centuries and since Tibet is part of China, hence, it lays claims on Arunachal Pradesh, that is, about 90000 sq. kms.

Every time the Indian Prime Minister or any other Union Minister visits the frontier state,[2] China registers official objections, particularly its statehood. India's jurisdiction over the region is globally recognised, and its people have displayed no inclination to leave India.

China has historical arguments contingent on Buddhist ties. India bases its arguments on colonial legacy of demarcation of land between India and Tibet in the form of McMahon Line, and India's geography favours claim as it is in the south of Himalayan watershed. The central dispute has been over the Tawang district that lies in the north-eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh and wherein situated is the largest monastery of India. The Tawang Monastery was founded by the Tibetan Lama, Lodre Gyatso in 1681 in line with the wishes of Nagwang Lobsang Gyatso, the 5th Dalai Lama who was born in Tawang. The

[1] Shukla, S. (2013), *"India 'ready to let China keep Aksai Chin' if neighbour country drops claim to Arunachal Pradesh"* , Mail Online India, Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2515187/India-ready-let-China-Aksai-Chin-neighbour-country-drops-claim-Arunachal-Pradesh.html
[2] Kalita, P. (2020), *"Arunachal Pradesh Part of South Tibet, Claims China Again",* Available at: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/arunachal-pradesh-part-of-south-tibet-claims-china-again/articleshow/77992800.cms

monastery is revered by the people of Buddhist faith from India, Bhutan and Tibet. There was solidarity between Indian rulers and Tibetan civilization in ancient times, and the exact boundary was neither defined nor imposed. And there had been strong ties between Lhasa (in Tibet) and Tawang Monasteries, which is cited as the claims on Arunachal Pradesh by China since Tibet is now part of China. To help resolve the conflict, China wants that the monastery once belonged to Tibet and wants New Delhi to hand it over. Tawang is a heavily forested area with white stupas and steep hills, where the people of the Monpa tribe are in the majority. Tawang is also a proxy warfare land between China and HH the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan's exiled spiritual leader, who fled to exile in 1959 via this region.

Tawang Monastry

Aksai-Chin, which is now part of China, is claimed by India and Arunachal Pradesh part of India is claimed by China. From the 1980s, China is demanding that India should give Tawang to them as part of border settlement. In 2013, Indian foreign ministry notified that Aksai Chin's area could remain in Chinese hands in return for Arunachal Pradesh being recognised as part of its territory officially. There has always been border transgression between the two states.

Dai Bingguo who was Beijing's special representative during 2003 - 2013 to negotiate on India-China border dispute did not mention Tawang in his memoirs, ***Strategic Dialogues***. All he quoted was that the "Sino-Indian boundary has never been formally demarcated, but is a traditional customary line formed by the people of the two nations". [3] In terms of putting pressure on India, the Chinese have

[3] Joshi, M (2017), *"Is Tawang Becoming The Focus Of Sino-Indian Relations?",* The Wire, Available at : https://thewire.in/external-affairs/tawang-china-india-relations

used the unresolved frontier as part of aggressive diplomacy. Tawang may very well have appeared as the centre of Sino-Indian relations that revolve around Tibet's heartland, but it is hard to deny that the state and the people are very much part of India. The Chinese are anxious about the location of Tawang where the current 81-year-old Dalai Lama chooses to reincarnate. Tawang town helps explain the reason for all the fear and the fury between India and China for decades. **China's** border is just 23 miles away; **Lhasa**, the Tibetan capital, 316 miles; and **Beijing**, 2,676 miles.[4]

China has been proactive in terms of building the infrastructure, railways, roads and settlements in proximity to the LAC whereas India has been reluctant to do so. However, both the nations have marked presence of military in the border regions. Four strategic lines along the India-China border have been approved by Indian government of which three are in Arunachal Pradesh, these are - Missamari-Tenga-Tawang (378 km), Pasighat-Tezu-Rupai (227 km) and North Lakhimpur-Bame-Silapathar (249 km). Once these are built, this will facilitate in the movement of troops and logistics for the Indian armed Forces and hence fast build-up of force on the LAC. Both the nations have strategic posturing on ground including conventional military, that is, boots-on-ground, airfields and ALGs facilitating projection of air power as also the deployment of long range missiles in proximity of LAC to be employed in case of eventuality of conflicts escalating. India is improving its road network and Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) network at the border areas. India had long been reticent about vast expansion, assuming that upgrading its border infrastructure would allow Chinese movement inside Indian Territory in the event of a war. [5]

According to Deutsch (1991), conflict is not necessarily negative; instead, conflict is an inevitable feature of all social relations. It may take any course - neutral, destructive or a constructive one. With the perspective of Indo-China relations, till date, it has been tilting towards moderately destructive course. It is pertinent to mention that China has settled its land border disputes with all its neighbours other than India.

The dispute between India and China has been a barrier for peaceful coexistence in the region, due to which other neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan have also come into focus. Boundary Control and claim over land have been the cause and issue of international conflict between the dragon and the elephant. The two nuclear powers have come face-to-face with each other at many instances on rough, hostile terrain. India's building of justified infrastructure like the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO) road in the Ladakh region was the main trigger of Galwaan Valley clash last year. It has also increased the capability and movement of Indian military soldiers and provides them with supply and aid rapidly in a conflict.

After decades of negligence, India is trying to improve its borders to counteract China's technological superiority. It has started a large-scale road and rail projects in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, all areas which border China. Ghatibagarh-Lipulekh and Dämping-Yangtze in Arunachal Pradesh are the key projects which are crucial for India.

Now and then, at the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh, there have been aggressive border patrolling by soldiers from both sides and standoffs and minor clashes are the norms particularly in the disputed areas. China has always rejected India's plea concerning the loan from Asian Development Bank to help the state Arunachal Pradesh in development and help build up infrastructure to fight natural

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/world/asia/04chinaindia.html
[5] Jakhar, P. (2020), *"India and China race to build along a disputed frontier"*, Available at : https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53171124

disasters. As per the latest incident, China has built a village consisting of 101 homes, in Arunachal Pradesh, about 4.5 km "within Indian territory of the de facto border". The village is located on the Tsari Chu river banks in Upper Subansiri district, an area along the McMahon Line.

There is a possibility that with the signing of 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Agreement Principles for Settlements of the India-China Border Question, which was the first political document between the two states might help to resolve the border issue and both the countries might follow the conflict resolution solution as per international relations, which has been going on for decades.

However, as of now, the resolution of the claims of China over Arunachal Pradesh and hence the border dispute seems to be unresolved. India has to empower the people of this state through literacy and employment, build the infrastructure, rail, road, energy and water to display its concern of the state. There is a precedent with China as it has resolved the border disputes with other nations. It may resolve the border issue peacefully and recognize Arunachal Pradesh as part of India, if India shapes its policy towards China over the next few years. If China's perception of India is that of a weak actor and the Tibet issue continues to simmer, then China will be aggressive regarding its claim on Arunachal Pradesh. If India displays to be a strong actor, the issue may get resolved.

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