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## ARUNACHAL PRADESH: THE STRATEGIC CORE OF INDIA – CHINA TENSIONS

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### **Abstract:**

*Arunachal Pradesh being the most north eastern state of India shares a strategically boundary with China, Bhutan and Myanmar. With its strategic location it has many historical conflicts with the China. But in 21<sup>st</sup> century it has played an immense role in the country development and potential as a hub to 'Look East Policy'. This article investigates the past historical relations and conflicts between India and China more specifically the Arunachal Pradesh as the strategic core of China India tensions. Besides the articles also focus on the growing relations between the India and China like the trade, technology, innovation, and more importantly the region could also serve as the most significant connectivity to neighbour country for various economic development of the country. This article further provides the geopolitical tensions between the India and China since the British time and more specificy on the Arunachal Pradesh like the Tawang Monastery, Mc Mohan Line and claiming of Arunachal Pradesh as Zangnam or South Tibet as their territory.*

**Keywords:** India – China relations, national security, monastery, economic development, tourism, strategic importance, defense policy, diplomacy, brahmaputra river.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In the past decade, India and China established a good relation, however the conflicts between the both states deteriorate for the first time when the Mc Mohan Line were drawn in 1914 as the international boundary between India and China in the Arunachal Pradesh. However, China did not accept this line arguing that Tibet at that time was not sovereign and cannot make decision and accept the Mc Mohan Line (Rubin & Lamb, 1967) (Abitbol, 2009). Being under the circumstances of territorial disputes both countries still tried to establish a good relation for trade, border peace, confidence building and cooperation. This brought the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 where both the countries agree and established a healthy relation between the both the countries. However, the Panchsheel Agreement did not last after the war broke out in 1962 known as Sino – Indian war (Abitbol, 2009).

Besides this there has been a many non - military tactics used by the China like the changing of districts and villages name of Arunachal Pradesh to assert administrative claim and establishment of Staple Visa particularly for the Arunachal citizens etc. However, after 1962 War, The Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA) of 1993 is considered as the landmark accord between the India and China which aim at the establishment and maintaining of peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) ( Kumar, 2020). The relations between both the country still stand today despite some border conflicts and non - military tactics but has not witnessed any full – scale war like the 1962 conflict. Also in the contemporary time both the country are dependent upon each other for country economic development and under the continuous tactics to establish a healthy relation between the both countries.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

This research includes a **qualitative content analysis** of secondary sources from various other scholar articles and from the government of India and international agreements on India – China relations and trends.

We interpret the findings through the three theoretical lenses : **Historical Method, Realist framework and Constructivist Approach.**

**Historical Method,** The Simla Convention of 1914 was a treaty between the Great Britain, China, and Tibet. They established the Mc Mohan Line as the boundary between the British India and Tibet. However China refused to signed the final convention, leading Britain and Tibet to sign a bilateral agreement and binding between themselves. The Mc Mohan line is an 890 kilometer boundary established in 1914 during the Shimla Convention between British India and Tibet. It runs from the Bhutan to the Brahmaputra River, separating Arunachal Pradesh from Tibet. India recognizes this as legal border but China refuses it (W. F., 1967).

Over the unresolved border issue between the India and China in 1962 which was a full – scale war over the territorial dispute claiming over the Aksai Chin and the North Eastern Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh). However, the tensions surged when India gave asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 which also broke the Panchsheel Agreement between the both. (J. R., 1967)

**Realist Framework,** provides insight on how the realist assumes an anarchic international system where states priorities security, power, and survival. Where states are the primary actors and survival and security are the highest priorities. In the Realist framework, territorial disputes continuous because every state view territory as the essential to national security and power overall the survival. Due to this reason, China sees Arunachal Pradesh as an important territory for power establishment, resources and overall the it protects all the other North – Eastern states from the China. For instance China non - military tactics of changing of names in Arunachal Pradesh and claiming it as their territory, staple visa etc. In order to counter the tactics of China, India plays an important role in the international level and counter attacks to China tactics not only in Arunachal Pradesh but also in the

other part of the South Asian Nations.

Constructivist Approach, it highlights the role of India in the international level to counter China growing influence in the South East Asia region from trade and military influence. Arunachal Pradesh has been a strategic location for both India and China because China sovereignty of Arunachal Pradesh means dominance and taking control over all North – Eastern States and the Chicken Neck will be cut off from the rest of India and besides this China could slowly influence rest of the South East Nations. This pose a threat to India and also at the International level. This lead to a counter attack from India from dominance of China. Example : The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) comprises of United States, Japan, India and Australia to counter the dominance and influence of China in Indo – Pacific.

### **The Historical Roots:**

Arunachal Pradesh a state in North – East India, which shares a boundary with three countries, Bhutan to the west, China (Tibet) to the Northeast and Myanmar to the east. It was also known as the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) till 1972, until it became a Union Territory. It became a full fledge state on 20 February 1987. (Joshi, 2005)

During the British rule in India the boundary was not clearly demarcated between the Tibet (now China) and the Arunachal Pradesh. This poorly demarcation of boundary led to a new boundary line between them which is known as the Mc Mohan Line which clearly shows a boundary between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh including Arunachal Pradesh as the part of India Territory. However, China rejected the Mc Mohan Line agreement stating that Tibet lacked the authority to make any decisions and sign any international treaties.

However, after the annexation of Tibet by China in 1950-51 it asserted full sovereignty over the Tibet, leading to which made China retroactively questioned all the agreements made by the Tibet authority including the Mc Mohan Line. This led China to claim Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet or Zangnam. With the unresolved borders disputes both the country agreed to established an agreement which is known as The Panchsheel Agreement on April 29, 1954 which aimed to boost trade and establish good relations between India and Tibet (China). Also, India supported China in International representations.

However not much of year after the agreement, a dispute began between India and China over the undefined Himalayan Border where China occupied over the Aksai Chin and claiming over the Arunachal Pradesh as the part of Tibet territory. The tensions escalated into full – fledged war in 1962 also known as the Sino – Indian war over the asylum of Dalai Lama in 1959. In the year 1960 the Chinese premiere Zhou Enlai said that if India gave up over the Aksai chin, they would withdraw the claim of Arunachal Pradesh (then North Eastern Frontier Agency) (Panda, 2024). But Nehru rejected the suggestions saying that China had no right to claim any of the areas of Indian Territory. Throughout

the war of 1962 India started following a 'Forward policy' where they began to send troops over all the disputed region and borders. However, China declared its ceasefire on 21 November and stated that from 1 December 1962 their Chinese soldiers would retreat 20 km behind the Line of Actual Control. (N., 1971)

### **Tawang as Epicenter:**

Tawang a district in the Indian territory of Arunachal Pradesh holds a religious significance for the Buddhist religion and is consider the largest Buddhist monastery in India and second – oldest in the Asia (Y, 2025). Being a home to Buddhist religion it shares a same faith as the people of Tibet and it is believed that Tawang shares a historical tie with Lhasa (the capital of Tibet) and the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso was born in Tawang and later went back to Lhasa to rule there. This becomes a reason for the China to argue over the claim of Tawang as the part of Tibet Territory (China). (Wickhamsmith, 2012)

Tawang holds a strategic location for China because it offers an entry point to Arunachal Pradesh and rest of the North Eastern state which ultimate pose a threat for the rest of the Nations. Also, by geography Arunachal Pradesh particularly plays as a security and shield for the Bhutan. And by chance Tawang is occupied by China, Bhutan would be surrounded by China which is unfavorable for India's security. And if any war arises in future Arunachal Pradesh is the shortest route to China. Therefore, it holds a strategic key importance for India and highly disadvantages for China. Another reason for the key importance for Tawang is that if China takes control over it than it will be easy for them to access over the Siliguri Corridor or the Chicken's Neck of India which will provide a significant high altitudes and advantages position for China. (Prakash, 2024)

Siliguri Corridor is a Narrow path of land which run approximately 60 km long and 17-22 km wide sharing a border with three countries between Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, which connects the rest of the Eight North Eastern states with the rest of Indian State by only land (MA Ali & M Kamraju, 2020).

### **Non – Military Tactics:**

Over time China has been using non - military tactics over the claiming of Arunachal Pradesh referring it as the Zangnam or South Tibet. China has been releasing a standardized Chinese - name for the districts, villages, mountains, rivers, residential areas etc of the name of Arunachal Pradesh. Total list are : 6 locations in 2017, 15 locations in 2021, 11 locations in 2023, 30 locations in April 2024 and 27 locations in May 2025. Also, China consistently Release, standardized maps internationally and within its domestic education system as Arunachal Pradesh to be a part of China. (A., 2021)

'Xiaokang' border villages is another tactic used by the Chinese government where the villages near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) particularly with India have been seen a huge initiative of infrastructure developments along the LAC. The sudden development of villages infrastructure along

the LAC is to provide shelter to the Civilian and to the presence of Chinese military over the border. This provides a continuous military over the LAC and proper infrastructure development over the LAC (Kaur, J, Kumar, D., & Jacob, J. T., 2025). This also ultimately pose a threat to the India national security. In response to this China non - military tactics, Indian government came up with many different schemes to counter this threat like the Vibrant Villages Program where it tried to modernize the villages and road infrastructure along the India – China border. Border Organization (BRO) is also one of the projects of infrastructure of roads along the India – China border.

The Stapled visas as non - military tactics used by the China against the Arunachal Pradesh citizens claiming that they don't need any officially stamped visa since Arunachal Pradesh is a part of China territory. This directly indicates that they don't recognize Arunachal Pradesh as part of Indian territory and its sovereignty over this state. There are various cases where China produced stapled visa for Arunachal citizens and there is even a time and situation where they are denied in the airport and banned from entry. One of the most recent cases which happened back in July 2023, where three wushu player from Arunachal Pradesh did not get a clearance from China to participate in the Asian games in Hangzhou. Later they were provided with 'Stapled Visa' to the three wushu players from Arunachal Pradesh, reacting to which Indian government withdraw the players from the China over the diplomatic disputes and considered it as unacceptable (Bath & Taki, Stapled visa controversy: A thought in hindsight, 2024). There is also a time when the citizens from the Arunachal were freed to visit with stamped visas without any glitches or stapled visa. Example : The 4<sup>th</sup> UN conference on women, held in Beijing was attended by four ladies from Arunachal Pradesh in 1995 with regular visas. There are several incidents where China tried to show that Arunachal Pradesh citizens did not need a regular or officially stamped visa to visit their own country. (Bath & Taki, Stapled visa controversy: A thought in hindsight, 2024)

### **Hydro - politics over Brahmaputra River:**

The trans – boundary river, the Brahmaputra which originates from Tibet (China) also known as Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet which flows directly through Indian state in the Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam than Bangladesh. The river provides a significant water resources to the people living in the Brahmaputra basin for various purpose. The hydro – politics over Brahmaputra River comes into play as Brahmaputra stand at the center point of conflicts between India and China. Since river plays a significant role to both country for economic growth, living standards, demands for factories and industries, this includes the play of Hydro -politics between the two Nations. However, in order to satisfy its economic, resources and energy demand from the Brahmaputra River, China tends to ignore and participate in formal water sharing and management with India. (S, 2021)

Despite having issues and complexity over the Brahmaputra River both India and China work in cooperation in few areas. India and China bilateral relations on Brahmaputra River mainly includes

with objective to Flood control, Hydrological data sharing during the flood season and building a strategic trust between the Both nations. The first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on sharing hydrological data on Brahmaputra River was signed in 2002. In 2006 both the countries established the Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) for strengthening Trans – Border rivers. Again in 2018, the MoU of Expert Level Mechanism was renewed for sharing Hydrological data on Transboundary rivers. In 2013 another MoU was signed between India and China for strengthening cooperation over Trans - Border rivers. In 2018 India and China renewed their cooperation and hydrological data sharing over Brahmaputra River following a period of tensions that was suspended. Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Qingdao (China) for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in June 2018 signed an official MoU to share hydrological information over the Brahmaputra River during the flood season and even during non – flood season if water level rise. ( A, 2013)

### Case Studies:

1. One of the recent incidents over the Brahmaputra transboundary river case would be the China building a **60,000 MW hydro project Mega Dam** on the Yarlung Zangbo River in Tibet near Gelling village in the Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The Brahmaputra (Siang in Arunachal Pradesh) enters India near Gelling village than Assam (Brahmaputra) and Bangladesh (Jamuna) before it flows into the Bay of Bengal.

It was first announced in the year 2021 as the 14<sup>th</sup> Five – Year plan and the projects involve 5 cascade dams which is expected to be completed by the year 2030. And it is said that this hydro – project is believed to be three times more powerful than the Three Gorges Dam and world’s largest hydro – power station, with a capacity of 60 GW.

However, the projects raise a security concern for India and Bangladesh as these are the downstream nations. The main concern of threat to India is that China might use the Dam as the ‘‘water Bomb’’ towards India. They can also cause a dry season by blocking the water and excess releasing of water during floods too. This pose a threat to the country that are in the downstream especially the villages near the Brahmaputra Basin and people surviving over the river as the natural resources and sustainable for their livelihood.

In response to the construction of Dam by China, India also proposed Upper – Siang Multipurpose project in Arunachal Pradesh, an 11.2 GW dam which is design to regulate and control of any threat from the upstream Chinese actions. (Sharma, 2023)

2. The one of the most recent incidents would be the ‘‘**Wushu Incident**’’ in which Three athletes - from Arunachal Pradesh, Nyeman Wangsu, Onilu Tega and Mepung Lamgu, who were supposed to Represent India at the World University Games in Chengdu, China. When they applied for Visa, they were issued ‘‘Stapled Visas’’ on July 24, 2023 and rest of the teams received regular stamped visas, since the three athletes belong from Arunachal Pradesh. This has been a long -standing case between

India and China. Since China claim Arunachal Pradesh to be a part of South Tibet or Zangnam.

In response to the incident all the 12 wushu players were withdraw from the event at Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGI) and the Government of India strongly protested and condemned the actions by China and argued that sports should not mix with political issues. The Minister of External Affairs (MEA) stated that the China actions was a violation to spirits of sports and rules of Olympic council of Asia and

In support of the protest India's Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Youth Affairs & Sports, Mr. Anurag Sing Thakur cancelled his visit to the 19<sup>th</sup> Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. (Bath & Taki, Stapled visa controversy: A thought in hindsight, 2024)

### **Modern Infrastructure and Development along LAC:**

In response to the escalating tensions over the claim of Arunachal Pradesh as the part of Tibet (Tibet) the Government of India has taken up several measure and response in the acceleration of modern infrastructure and strategic developments of defense capability along the LAC.

One of the major actions undertaken is the expansion of **strategic road infrastructure**. The one of the most significant projects is the **Arunachal Frontier Highway**, which runs along the line of LAC connecting the remote border districts from western to eastern part of the Arunachal Pradesh. The highway roads which were build along the LAC was under the India – China Border Roads (ICBR) program by the Border Road Organisation (BRO) which helps in faster movements of soldiers, inspection and surveillance along the LAC. The roads also help in connecting with the isolated villages and borders integrating in economy, development and the presence of India administrative sovereignty over these zones too (TIMESOFINDIA.COM, 2025).

Another important construction would be the, **All – Weather Tunnels and Mountain Passes**, which helps in difficult times of monsoon from flood and helps in the connectivity through villages and borders. The **Sela Pass or Tunnel** which was inaugurated in 2024 has significantly helped in connection between Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) and Guwahati (Assam) by bypassing the snow blocked roads and mountains. The Sella Tunnel which is located in Tawang near India and China border helps in faster movements of troops along the border line without being interrupted and blocked by the snows and has played a significant role in the civilian movements and tourism. The project helps soldiers in ease and faster movement along the LAC. (Dutta, 2024)

The construction of bridges over the Himalayan rivers has also further helped in connecting with the rest of villages and easy movement of civilians and soldiers all along the border line. The **Dibang River Bridge** also known as **Sikang Bridge** is a 6.2 km long bridge in Arunachal Pradesh, India. The bridges connect villages like the Bomjir and Malek villages in the lower Dibang Valley helps in easy movement of civilians, tourism, connecting along the border lines during monsoon times. The Dibang bridge is also consider one of the longest bridges over water in India and helps in trade,

connecting to more remote places and eastern border of Arunachal Pradesh.

The connections and developments over the fastest means of **transportation like Railway and Air transport** which is one of the most important and significant infrastructure developments that helps in connecting Arunachal Pradesh with the rest of the nations by Land and Air. The fastest means of both the transports helps in carrying passengers, trade, soldiers, and helps in strategic preparedness for any circumstances like war, natural disasters etc. The Advance Landing Ground (ALG) which are located in **Tezu, Walong, Ziro, Tuting, Mechuka and walong** (Arunachal Pradesh) is design to support rapid military mobilization to Indian Air Force, airlift troops, equipment and supplies during the time of any emergencies especially in remote places, mountains, borders etc. (Reporter, 2018)

One of the most significant step taken up by the Government was the **Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP)** which was a strategic initiative design to develop and provide better infrastructure over the villages near the border to improve the road connectivity, improve the quality of life, better infrastructure, social development like the better health facilities, education, access to clean water and sanitation by transforming these remotes areas which was once called as ‘‘Last Villages’’ into ‘‘First Villages’’ of India. The better infrastructure helps in the ease movement of civilians, soldiers along the LAC, trades, connection with the more remote villages and helps in preparedness of any situation like war etc. (Department of Finance, 2023)

#### **Conclusion:**

Arunachal Pradesh plays a pivotal role as being in the strategic location sharing border with Tibet (China). Being as the epicenter of war between India and China it also acts as a shield for the rest of the North – Eastern state. The constant political dispute between India and China over claiming of Arunachal Pradesh as a part of Tibet by China holds a major threat to the people of Arunachal Pradesh and the national security of India. The dirty politics played by China like naming of Arunachal Pradesh as Zangnam or South Tibet and changing of places name in Standardized maps of Chinese both domestic and International to claim over the Arunachal Pradesh and influence sovereignty over the state. There have been a sudden and rapid infrastructure developments of roads, Xiaokang border villages, where the villages near the border was witnessed sudden development and high military presence of Chinese soldiers along LAC. However the Government of India has always been condemned such non – military tactics used by China and in response to China rapid growing infrastructure along LAC led the government to counter with various projects and schemes like, Vibrant Village Programme (VVP), National Highway connecting all parts of Arunachal Pradesh, better road infrastructure along the LAC, Sella Tunnel, Bridges, etc to for better connectivity and integrity of nations and to prefer for any circumstances.

Most importantly, Arunachal Pradesh is and will always remain an integral, inalienable part of India.

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