

China's Territorial Claim on India's Eastern Sector: Tibet as Core



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Summary

China's territorial claim on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh has been a longstanding issue of concern for Indian foreign policy. While both countries signed a framework agreement to resolve the issue in 2005, not much progress has been made towards a final resolution. This Issue Brief offers insights on the Chinese claim from a local perspective based on four interpretative frameworks: Tibet as the "Core Issue" to the Chinese territorial claim; China's Military Modernization in Tibet; Infrastructure Development; and the 'Balance of Power'. It also offers five policy implications that emerge from the analysis. The author argues that India needs to shore up its air power and "Special Forces" in Arunachal Pradesh in order to strengthen its defence posture in the eastern sector.

China claims 90,000 square kms of territory in the Northeast of India,¹ which includes the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh (83,743 square kms).² This territorial dispute between India and China has a historical context and is based on a lack of proper demarcation of the 1,080 km eastern border.³ China questions the 1914 McMahon Line in this sector and argues that the area now known as Arunachal Pradesh belonged to Tibet historically, with the Tawang Monastery having tributary relationship with Lhasa. Since Tibet is now a part of China, goes its argument, so does Arunachal Pradesh. While there is a 'Special Representative' mechanism between India and China to resolve the border dispute within the framework of the 2005 Agreement,⁴ what is of serious concern is the Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh, which has grown more vocal and aggressive since 2006.⁵

On a visit to Arunachal Pradesh in March 2012 as a participant in a National Seminar on "Voices from the Border",⁶ and a field study conducted thereafter, I gathered certain significant fresh insights from the local population on the Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh.⁷ These insights can be located within four interpretative frameworks: Tibet as the "Core Issue" to the Chinese territorial claim; China's Military Modernization in Tibet; Infrastructure development; and the 'Balance of Power'.

¹ For more on this, see Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=220117416> (Accessed on March 24, 2012).

² "Arunachal Pradesh" at http://www.india.gov.in/knowindia/st_arunachal.php (Accessed on December 9, 2009).

³ See "History of the state" at <http://arunachalgovernor.gov.in/html/history.htm> (Accessed on March 23, 2012).

⁴ For the complete text of the 2005 India-China Agreement, see *The Hindu* at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/nic/0041/indiachinatxt.htm> (Accessed on August 7, 2010).

⁵ For more on this, see Namrata Goswami, "China's Territorial Claim on the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh: Crafting an Indian Response", *IDSAs Issue Brief*, October 25, 2012 at http://www.idsa.in/system/files/IB_Chinasterritorialclaim.pdf (Accessed on March 30, 2012).

⁶ National Seminar on "Voices from the Border: Indian Response to the Chinese Claim on Arunachal Pradesh" organised at Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, the Rajiv Gandhi University, and the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, March 08-09, 2012, followed immediately thereafter by a field study by me, March 10-15, 2012.

⁷ In March 2011, I had conducted field work in the border districts of Arunachal Pradesh; namely, Upper Siang and Tawang, as well as in middle districts like Lower and Upper Subansiri, and Lower Siang. The insights from that field visit can be found at Namrata Goswami, "China's Claim on Arunachal Pradesh: Local Perspectives", *IDSAs Issue Brief*, July 11, 2011 at <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/ChinasClaimonArunachalPradesh> (Accessed on March 30, 2012).

Tibet as the “Core Issue”

Most local academics and policy makers argue that Chinese aggressiveness is increasing *vis-à-vis* Arunachal Pradesh due to Beijing’s growing insecurity over Tibet. Indeed, the existing strong Tibetan culture in Arunachal Pradesh especially in Tawang and the Upper Siang districts provokes Chinese fears of a covert pan-Tibetan movement for independence from across the India-China border.⁸ This kind of insecurity is vindicated by the presence of the Dalai Lama in India.⁹



Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 2012. Picture Credit: Namrata Goswami

The local discourses identify the Tawang monastery and its linkage to Tibet as predominant in Tibetan Buddhist discourses in the Eastern Himalayan belt.¹⁰ After China occupied Tibet in 1949, the Chinese government viewed the occupation of Tawang as an important source of legitimacy for its own hold over Tibet in the long term.¹¹ While China did occupy Tawang

⁸ Interview with former Home Minister and Member of the State Assembly, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, March 11, 2012. Name withheld on request of interviewee.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with Tawang Monastery Spokesperson, Lama Acharya, Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, March 19, 2011.

¹¹ Ibid.

in 1962, the lack of supply lines from Tibet into Tawang, absence of roads within Tibet to the India-China border, and a hostile Tibetan and Arunachali population would have made the occupation an extremely costly venture over time.¹² Hence, the Chinese troops retreated.

This Tawang-Lhasa linkage also had an administrative dimension. Most local discourses converge on the view that Tawang and the neighbouring Monpa-inhabited areas were taken over by India in 1951 under the leadership of the Naga Indian Army officer, Major Ranenglao (Bob) Khathing. Before 1951, the Monpas of the area were Tibetan subjects and gave tribute to the Lhasa monastery. As a result, administrative and judicial issues had been conducted by the Tawang monastery utilising Lhasa administrative directives.¹³ This administrative dimension is not lost on China and based on that, it justifies its claim on Arunachal Pradesh or what it refers to as Southern Tibet.¹⁴

But the Monpas of Tawang as well as the Tawang Monastery welcomed the Indian forces led by Major Khathing and view themselves as Indian citizens.¹⁵ Local politicians are categorical in stating that the status of Arunachal Pradesh within India has never been questioned by the local people. In fact, there is a prevailing sense of loyalty to the idea of India.¹⁶ This is contrasted with China's greatest vulnerability with regard to Tibet: the absence of any attachment or loyalty to the Chinese state from the Tibetan population.¹⁷ Hence, India must not hesitate in fully shoring up its presence in Arunachal Pradesh with all the means at its disposal. Working within the framework of cooperation, a local scholar argued that the McMahon Line drawn on a piece of paper by a colonial British officer should not be taken as sacrosanct and there must be enough flexibility to redraw the line if needed keeping in mind the ground realities.¹⁸ Hence, a give and take policy will be supported by the local people towards a final resolution of the border dispute if they are consulted on the matter beforehand.

Added to this was the clarification provided by General (Retd.) J. J. Singh, the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, on Chinese troops' transgression into the Indian side of the border.

¹² Interview with local politician, n. 8.

¹³ Interview with Tawang Monastery Spokesperson, n.10.

¹⁴ Matthew Akester, "An Overview of Relations in the Modern Period", Tibetan Scholar, Dharamshala, at the "Voices from the Border" Arunachal Pradesh Seminar, n. 6.

¹⁵ Interview with Tawang Monastery Spokesperson, n.10.

¹⁶ Interview with local politician, n. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gomar Basar, "The case for redrawing of "McMahon Line" and Establishment of a New Boundary for a New Paradigm in Indo-Sino Relation", JNU Ph.D. Scholar and resident of Arunachal Pradesh, "Voices from the Border" Arunachal Pradesh Seminar, n.6.

General Singh acknowledged that after 1962, China went back 20 kms from the McMahon Line; and if Chinese troops transgress into Indian territory, so do the Indian troops into Chinese territory, since it is difficult to ascertain the exact boundary in such heights and deep snow.¹⁹

Another issue connected to Tibet is the contention over river water diversion. There are reports that China intends to divert the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, thereby cutting off a vital water source for the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh. On this aspect, however, General Singh categorically stated that there is no such plan and most dams that China is building on the Tsangpo are “run of the river” dams. Also, at 17,000 ft, diversion of the river through extremely difficult mountain ranges is a near impossibility.²⁰

Chinese Military Modernisation in Tibet

China’s claim on Arunachal Pradesh is viewed by locals as a historical conflict between two of the rising powers of Asia. And they view with growing apprehension the rapid Chinese military modernisation across the border in Tibet.²¹ China has upgraded its military presence in Tibet very close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh by replacing its old liquid fuelled, nuclear capable CSS-3 intermediate range ballistic missiles with “more advanced CSS-5 MRBMs”. Intercontinental missiles such as the DF-31 and DF-31A with a range of 5,500 km to 8000 km have also been deployed by China at Delingha, north of Tibet. On the border with India, China has deployed 13 Border Defence Regiments amounting to around 300,000 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops. Airfields have also been established at Hoping, Pangta and Kong Ka; these are in addition to the existing six airfields in the Tibetan Autonomous Region for supporting fighter aircraft operations and to enhance the PLA’s airlift capability. Of critical value to China’s force structure in this regard is the PLA’s 23 Rapid Reaction Forces (RRFs).²² The RRFs have been considerably modernised into a hi-tech force equipped for a limited war in the Himalayas.²³ They are on a 24 hour operational mode, and are trained to function in any environment. These units are composed of two group armies, nine divisions, three brigades, and seven regimental or

¹⁹ General (Retd.) J. J. Singh, Governor, Arunachal Pradesh, Inaugural Address, “Voices from the Border”, Arunachal Pradesh Seminar, n.6.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with local politician, n.8.

²² For details on China’s RRF, see Park Changhee, “North Korean Contingency and Prospects of China’s Military Intervention”, Iimin International Relations Institute, Working Paper Series, MacArthur Foundation’s Asia Security Initiative, October 2010, pp. 19-21.

²³ Namrata Goswami, “Caught in a Dangerous Web in the Himalayas”, *Eastern Sentinel*, Itanagar, March 14, 2012, p. 1. Also, inputs provided by Subir Bhaumik, Former BBC East India Correspondent and at present, Editor, *Seven Sisters’ Post*, in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 08-09, 2011.

battalion level units with an approximate strength of 400,000 personnel [including the Resolving Emergency Mobile Combat Forces (REMCF)].²⁴ All three divisions of the Chinese military namely, the Army, Navy and the Air Force, have their own RRF units. At present, there are six RRF divisions stationed at Chengdu, very close to Tibet.²⁵ Formed in the 1990s after the first Gulf War, the RRF's main mission is to win or prevent highly intensive regional conflicts and enhance China's military capabilities in a hi-tech environment using the latest in military technology.²⁶ Significantly, the RRFs possess the airlift capacity to reach the India-China border in 48 hours. Also to be noted is the fact that the six RRF divisions stationed at Chengdu are always in an operational readiness mode, capable of operating in all kinds of terrain.²⁷ Of critical importance to India is the fact that the RRFs train in Southwest China (Yunnan), a terrain very similar to that in Arunachal Pradesh. India needs to worry the most about the RRFs because they will be the first line of offence used by China to occupy key areas in Arunachal Pradesh and resist the forward movement of the Indian Army in the event of a conflict.

India has responded to this Chinese military build-up by taking a strategic decision in October 2011 to deploy the *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missile, which has a flight range of 290 km, in the eastern sector to strengthen its defence posture *vis-à-vis* China. A five year expansion plan to induct 90,000 more troops and deploy four more divisions in the eastern sector is also underway. Already, there are 120,000 Indian troops stationed in the eastern sector, supported by two Sukhoi 30 MKI squadrons from Tezpur in Assam.²⁸ However, compared to the Indian Army's 5 Mountain Division's airlift capability, the airlift capability of the RRFs is superior given the latter's possession of IL-76, Yun-8, S-70, Z-8, Z-9 and H 5 transport planes.

Infrastructure Development

China has also vastly improved its road connectivity in the provinces bordering India. Road linkages are seen as enabling troop movements and keeping supply lines open during

²⁴ See Changhee, n. 22.

²⁵ Inputs from security forces personnel, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 12, 2012. Name withheld on request of interviewee.

²⁶ See Andrew N. D. Yang and Col. Milton Wen-Chung Liao (Retd.), "PLA Rapid Reaction Force: Concept, Training and Preliminary Assessment", *RAND Study*, at www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF145/CF145.chap4.pdf (Accessed on March 23, 2012).

²⁷ Inputs from interviews conducted with security forces personnel, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 10-14, 2012. Names withheld on request of interviewees.

²⁸ For more on this, see Namrata Goswami, "China's Response to India's Military Upgrade in Arunachal Pradesh: A Classic Case of "Security Dilemma", *IDSAs Strategic Comment*, November 18, 2011 at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChinasResponsetoIndiasMilitaryUpgradeinArunachalPradesh_ngoswami_181111 (Accessed on April 17, 2012).

times of conflict. Under its “Go West” policy, China has invested nearly US \$325 billion in major infrastructure projects in Western China.²⁹ The 2000 km Qinghai-Tibet railway has made PLA movement into Tibet easy. Roads from Lhasa to the India-China border are also being improved.³⁰ Connectivity has also vastly improved from Yunnan into Myanmar. The north-eastern part of Myanmar along the China-Myanmar border is controlled by the Wa ethnic group, perhaps boasting of the largest ethnic guerrilla army in the world: the United Wa State Army of about 30,000 armed men “backed by armour and artillery and even surface-to-air missiles”.³¹ The Wa controlled areas of Myanmar have an open border with China. Further, they are linked to the Chinese electricity grid, their dirt roads are turning into highways, and they enjoy good internet and mobile phone access from China.³² The Wa State Army’s support for the Chinese presence in Myanmar could bring China right up to the border with Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, three of the northeastern Indian states which border Myanmar. The highway from Tibet to Nepal is also under construction, thereby providing access to China via Nepal into India. While this road-building spree by China has an overt economic rationale, the worry for India is that it could also serve a covert dual purpose: troop movement, with or without the consent of the host country.

The lack of road infrastructure on the Indian side of the border is a perennial source of concern for Arunachalis.³³ Almost all people interviewed expressed anguish at the state of the road infrastructure and governance in Arunachal Pradesh.³⁴ The fear expressed is that if a Chinese land attack were to occur, it would take Indian army convoys at least a couple of days to reach the border given the terrible road conditions. The *Arunachal Pradesh 2005 Human Development Report*³⁵ identified infrastructure development as one of the key concerns

²⁹ “China: Western Development Strategy”, Climate Connect, London, 2010, at <http://www.climate-connect.co.uk/Home/sites/default/files/Western%20Development%20Strategy%20Overview%20Climate%20Connect.pdf> (Accessed on March 05, 2012).

³⁰ Inputs from security forces personnel, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 12, 2012. Name withheld on request of interviewee.

³¹ Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, Faber and Faber, London, 2011, p. 107.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interview with ITBP officer, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 13, 2012. Name withheld on request of interviewee.

³⁴ Interview with Jarpum Gamlin, Editor, *Eastern Sentinel*, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 12, 2012. Interview with Arunachal Vikas Parishad, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 13, 2012.

³⁵ Arunachal Pradesh Human Development Report 2005, at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/asiathepacific/india/name,3398,en.html> (Accessed on March 12, 2011).

of the state. In 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a package of Rs. 24,000 crore for building the 1,500 kms Trans-Arunachal Pradesh highway.³⁶ Yet, ground realities continue to be grim with the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) stating that it is an arduous task to build two-lane highways in such hilly and inaccessible terrain.³⁷ Also, massive local corruption is seen as the cause of growing frustration and unhappiness with the nature of governance in Arunachal Pradesh. It is indeed worrisome that the Union government is turning a blind eye to high levels of corruption at almost all levels of the Arunachal government.

The “Balance of Power”

Interestingly, local discourses on the Chinese claim also throw up two significant perspectives based on classic “balance of power” considerations at the international level. First, the increased Chinese aggressiveness over claims on Arunachal Pradesh is viewed as a response to the growing India-US strategic partnership.³⁸ China is viewed as being extremely wary of this partnership, which has been strengthened by the 2004 India and the US ‘Next Steps in Strategic Partnership’, and the 2005 ‘Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal’. But at the same time, it is also pointed out that India-China tensions are being deliberately manufactured by the US and the West in order to ensure that the two Asian powers remain adversaries and contain each other’s rise as Great Powers. In this way, the US will continue to remain the primary power in Asia and the world.³⁹ Keeping the second perspective in light, there is a suggestion that in order to facilitate cooperation between India and China especially between people inhabiting the border areas on both sides, an Institute teaching Mandarin should be established in the Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, along with a department specialising on China and East Asia.⁴⁰ Building up language skills can help in bridging differences and facilitating trade at the border.

³⁶ “PM Announces Time-Frame for Arunachal Projects”, *The Indian Express*, October 24, 2009, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/pm-announces-timeframe-for-arunachal-project/524747/> (Accessed on December 11, 2011).

³⁷ Interview with S.K. Pandey, Commandant, 44 BRTF, Border Roads Organisation, Along, Arunachal Pradesh, March 10, 2011. I also visited the road construction sites along the India-China border in Tato and Mechuka. This is difficult terrain marked by high mountains and inaccessible areas.

³⁸ Interview with Nani Bhatt, Head, Political Science Department, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, March 10, 2012.

³⁹ Interview with local politician, n.8.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nani Bhatt, n. 38.

Policy Implications

In the light of the four interpretative frameworks on the Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh, five specific policy implications emerge.

- 1) **Perception Management:** It is quite clear from the local discourses on the Chinese claim that there is an urgent need for perception management regarding India's response to the Chinese claim. While it is a requirement that border negotiations need to be conducted in secret, there is the valid requirement for providing information on border defence by the ITBP and the Indian Army to the local people through public meetings. This kind of reassurance creates an atmosphere of trust in India's capability to defend its borders.
- 2) **Visible improvement of governance:** This is a priority issue. The biggest complaint of almost all local people is the lack of governance regarding basic needs like water, sanitation, health, roads, and education. Dilapidated hospitals, schools and government buildings gives the impression of neglect and decay and is a dangerous situation to prevail in such a strategic state as Arunachal Pradesh is to India. There is an urgent need to closely monitor how development funds allocated to the state by the Centre are being utilised and local corruption must be checked.
- 3) **Monthly report on river waters:** One of the biggest sources of anxiety for the local people is the supposed Chinese diversion plans of the Yarlung Tsangpo, which could lead to the drying up of local rivers like the Siang. While central and state government officials periodically deny the existence of such Chinese diversion plans, this is not enough to reassure people inhabiting these areas. A monthly scientific monitoring report on river water flows should be posted on the website of the Department of Water Resources, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. This should also be publicised in the local media.
- 4) **Special Forces:** India must earnestly build its own "Special Forces" attuned to operate in all kinds of terrain, with robust retaliatory capacities and equipped with high technology. These should be super specialised units of about 150,000 to 200,000 personnel. It should include a combination of Army, Navy and the Air Force. These troops should be able to handle the most advanced weapons system. Equipments like night vision goggles and knowledge of GPS is a must.
- 5) **Air Power:** Given the difficulty of the terrain, and weather creating obstacles for land supply in Arunachal Pradesh, if at all the Chinese escalate their posture, it will, at best, be a combined RRF and aerial move. India's air response therefore must be robust. The distance between Tezpur (the nearest Indian Air Force base) to Tawang is 345 kms and from Tawang to the LAC is another 60 kms. The two Sukhoi 30 MKI squadrons will cover the distance in less than 15 minutes given a cruise speed of 860

mph (1380 km/h) at 32,780 ft (10,000 m) and 1350 kmph over sea. The procurement of 6 C-130J Super Hercules transport aircraft with capabilities to fly very low and in difficult environment is an added advantage for special missions. Also, the physical movement of Indian troops to the border areas takes more than five to seven days due to very poor road conditions.⁴¹ India therefore needs to invest much more in its air capability in the border areas to deter any Chinese aggression. The decision to procure the *Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA)*, *Rafale*, is significant in this regard. India would need fighter aircraft capability that could match the Chinese J series of fighters like the Fourth Generation *J-10* or the upcoming Fifth Generation *J-20*. This kind of envisioned air superiority must be buttressed by specialised forces on the ground similar to China's RRF.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that India has to streamline its governance infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh so that the people of the state feel that local corrupt politicians are held accountable for misuse of public funds. People must benefit from the huge development funds being granted to the state by the Centre. Otherwise, the sense of loyalty and goodwill towards the idea of India will be lost. Local politicians must take upon themselves the responsibility of delivering good governance in the state. Blaming Delhi cannot be an excuse all the time for their own absence of commitment to develop the state and their corrupt practices. Finally, India must keep its stand on the resolution of the border dispute with China flexible, so that negotiations proceed meaningfully. That said, deterring any future Chinese aggression will have to involve air power as the first line of defence supported by 'Special Forces' on the ground.

⁴¹ Interview with Indian security personnel, Along, Arunachal Pradesh, March 08-10, 2011. Name withheld on request of interviewee.

⁴² The Indian armed troops are stationed near Tezpur and Missamari, Assam, and in Walong and Along, Arunachal Pradesh. The India-China border is guarded by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) supported by army patrol. There are plans to station 200,000 Indian troops in these camps.

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