



China's Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh: Crafting an Indian Response

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Summary

China's territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh and the unresolved border dispute in the eastern sector are major irritants in India-China relations. Arunachalis feel India can do more to assert its sovereignty in the area. Three plausible explanations for the increase in China's aggressive postures in India's eastern sector and a few policy recommendations are offered for consideration.

The picturesque state of Arunachal Pradesh in the Northeast of India is the historical bone of contention between India and China. China claims 90,000 square kilometres of territory from India in the eastern sector; the total land area of Arunachal Pradesh is 83,743 sq. km,¹ hence forming the bulk of that territorial claim. While this claim is long standing, China's aggressive posture in the eastern sector along the McMahon Line or the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has substantially increased in recent years. In November 2006, just days before Chinese Premier Hu Jintao's state visit to India, Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi stated that "In our position, the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. And Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that. That is our position."²

In May 2007, China denied a visa to Ganesh Koyu, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer from Arunachal Pradesh, who was to be a part of a 107 IAS officer study team visit to Beijing and Shanghai. China pointed out that Koyu is a Chinese citizen since he belongs to Arunachal Pradesh and hence could visit China without a visa.³ This was a deliberate act of provocation and assertion by China. In June 2009, China tried to block India's request for a US \$ 2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as the request included US \$ 60 million for a flood management, water supply, and sanitation project in Arunachal Pradesh.⁴ This was the first time that China sought to broadcast its claim on Arunachal Pradesh in a multilateral forum.⁵ Subsequently, in October 2009, China expressed deep dissatisfaction when Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh during the campaign for the state assembly elections. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu asserted that such visits trigger disturbances in the "disputed region".⁶ In November 2009, China openly protested the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh when Jiang Yu, the spokeswoman for China's foreign ministry asserted

¹ "Arunachal Pradesh" at http://www.india.gov.in/knowindia/st_arunachal.php (Accessed on December 9, 2009).

² "Arunachal Pradesh is our Territory: Chinese Envoy", November 14, 2006 at <http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/14china.htm> (Accessed on August 12, 2010).

³ China denies visa to IAS officer from Arunachal", *The Financial Express*, May 26, 2007 at <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/China-denies-visa-to-IAS-officer-from-Arunachal/200132/> (Accessed on August 12, 2010).

⁴ Pranab Dhal Samanta, "China Strikes Back on Arunachal", *The Indian Express*, September 18, 2009 at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/china-strikes-back-on-arunachal/518626/> (Accessed on October 19, 2010)

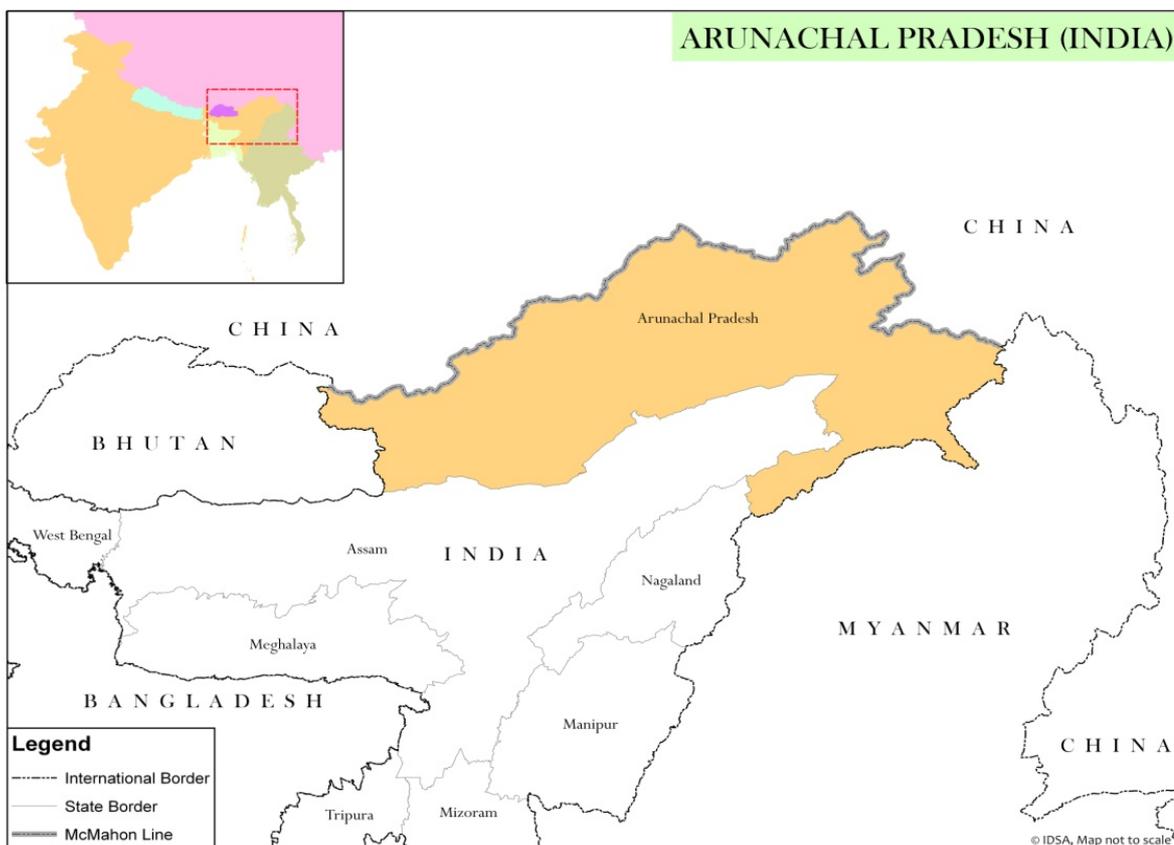
⁵ "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010", Department of Defense, US, 2010 at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf (Accessed on August 17, 2010), p. 17.

⁶ "Chinese ire over India border visit", BBC, October 13, 2009 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8304679.stm> (Accessed on August 16, 2010).

that "China's stance on the so-called 'Arunachal Pradesh' is consistent. We firmly oppose Dalai visiting the so-called 'Arunachal Pradesh'.⁷

China's aggressive posture on India's eastern border including Arunachal Pradesh, which is the border state, has not been lost on India. On October 15, 2010 at a seminar in New Delhi, Indian Army Chief, General V K Singh stated that India's armed forces must remain vigilant as the eastern border with China is disputed. Added to the disputed border, he argued, was the fact that China has grown in economic and military might in recent years, and its aggression is becoming a major national security irritant for India.⁸

Figure 1: Map of Arunachal Pradesh



The worrisome aspect for India in this context is that despite more than two decades of negotiations, India is the only country with which China has not settled its land border dispute. Neither has it given up its territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh. It is therefore critical from an Indian perspective to analyze the reasons behind China's territorial claim

⁷ Kritivas Mukherjee, "China Opposes Dalai Lama trip to Arunachal Pradesh", at <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-42388820090911> (Accessed on November 13, 2009).

⁸ Rahul Singh, "China, Pak major security irritants", *Hindustan Times*, October 15, 2010 at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/China-Pakistan-major-irritants-to-India-s-security-Army-Chief/Article1-613345.aspx> (Accessed on October 19, 2010).

on Arunachal Pradesh. In this context, this *Issue Brief* offers three plausible reasons behind China's claim on Arunachal Pradesh. These are:-

1. Balancing India.
2. Tibet Factor and 'Lost' Territories Argument.
3. Quest for Resources.

Balancing India

One plausible explanation for China's growing aggression in the eastern sector is the growing India-US strategic partnership. China is extremely wary of this partnership, strengthened by the 2004 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' agreement, the 2005 'Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal' and the 2008 "India-US Civil Nuclear Enabling Deal". Strengthening India-US relations are being interpreted by China as primarily influenced by one overarching motive: containment of China.⁹ To Chinese observers, the US is propping up India as a hedge against China.¹⁰ Two recent Chinese blog entries¹¹ argued that India's 2009 dispatch of additional 60,000 forces to Arunachal Pradesh was part of Western strategies to contain China. The Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh is therefore maintained as a bargaining chip by way of keeping India tied down so that it maintains a "strategic restraint" with regard to its growing partnership with the US, a country China views as possessing the economic and military capability to deter China in Asia.

The 2010 US Department of Defense Report to Congress indicates that China has replaced its old liquid fueled, nuclear capable CSS-3 intermediate range ballistic missile with "more advanced CSS-5 MRBMs" and has vastly improved border roads in the eastern sector for PLA movement.¹² Intercontinental missiles such as the DF-31 and DF-31A have also been

⁹ George Perkovich, "Faulty Promises The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2005, pp. 1-14.

¹⁰ See Jeff M. Smith, "India as a US hedge against China", *Asia Times*, August 07, 2008 at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JH07Df01.html (Accessed on August 13, 2010). Also Ehsan Ahrari, "China's View of US 'lily pad' Strategy", *Asia Times*, August 24, 2004 at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FH24Ad04.html> (Accessed on August 13, 2010). "A Himalayan Rivalry", *The Economist*, August 19, 2010 at <http://www.economist.com/node/16843717> (Accessed on August 23, 2010).

¹¹ See www.junshi315.cn and in www.warchina.com/n8183c21.aspx, December 11, 2009 analyzed by D S Rajan "China: Nationalistic Blogs Raise New Issues Concerning Sino- Indian Border", *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 3562, 24-Dec-2009, at <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers36%5Cpaper3562.html> (Accessed on August 12, 2010).

¹² Department of Defense Report, n. 5, p. 38.

deployed by China at Delingha, north of Tibet. On the border, China has deployed “13 Border Defence Regiments, the 52 Mountain Infantry Brigade to protect Southern Qinghai-Tibet region, the 53 Mountain Infantry Brigade to protect the high plateau in the Western sector, the 149th Division of the 13th Group Army in the Eastern Sector and the 61st Division of the 21st Group Army in the Western Sector”.¹³ Airfields have also been established at Hoping, Pangta and Kong Ka, along with two airfields at Lhasa and an additional four in the region for supporting fighter aircraft and enhancing PLA’s airlift capability that includes division strength of troops (20,000), brigade air-drops (3,500 troops) and helicopter lift of two battalions.¹⁴

*Significantly, the local Monpa ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh, who cross over to the Chinese side to meet kith and kin, express fear about the poor state of infrastructure on the Indian side where Indian troops are housed in temporary ramshackle huts, whereas the Chinese soldiers live in concrete barracks, along well paved roads. The local people view this as: China is serious about its territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh whereas India is not serious about the issue despite having lost a war against China in 1962.*¹⁵

Tibet Factor and ‘Lost’ Territories Argument

The second plausible explanation for China’s territorial claim is perhaps based on its Tibet policy and the “lost” territories argument. China’s territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh has great symbolic resonance for its legitimacy over Tibet. The Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama in the 17th century and is the second largest Tibetan monastery after Lhasa. It could well be that the 14th Dalai Lama chooses his successor from the Tawang monastery. China also believes that India makes it possible for the Dalai Lama to travel abroad, and his speeches around the world have kept the Tibetan issue alive and led to questioning Chinese legitimacy over Tibet.¹⁶ China perhaps fears that India might itself become a base for the subversive activities of the Dalai Lama’s supporters.¹⁷ Consequently, China believes that its aggressive posture on Arunachal Pradesh will deter India from overplaying its Tibet card, which includes 100, 000 Tibetan refugees living in India, against China.

¹³ Vijay Sakhuja, “Military Buildup Across the Himalayas: A Shaky Balance” , *China Brief*, 9 /18 September 10, 2009 at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35469&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=255e0ccfe7 (Accessed on August 14, 2010). For more on China’s missiles, see Department of Defense Report, US, n.14, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Local views gathered in Arunachal Pradesh by Australian Linguist during field trip, January-February 2010. Name not mentioned for protection of source.

¹⁶ For more on this, see John Garver, “The security dilemma in Sino-Indian relations”, *India Review*, 1/4, 2002, pp.1-38.

¹⁷ See “The Himalayan Rivalry”, *The Economist*, n. 10.

The claim on Arunachal Pradesh also forms part of China's 'lost' territories argument wherein the present regime aims to regain territory they believed belonged to China historically. Taiwan forms an important core of this 'lost' territory argument.¹⁸ An online poll conducted in October 2009 by *huanqiu.com*, the website of the *Global Times*, indicated that 96 per cent of 6,000 respondents supported the "lost" territory argument *vis-à-vis* Arunachal Pradesh and felt extremely agitated by the frequent visits of Indian leaders to the so-called disputed territory.¹⁹

Quest for Resources

In mid-2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy.²⁰ In order to sustain its economic growth in the long run, China's quest for resources is increasing, be it in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, South East Asia or South Asia. The worry is that Arunachal Pradesh does have resources like water and minerals and so does the entire Northeast of India.

Arunachal Pradesh has the largest hydro-electric potential in India with an estimated capacity of 50,000 MW. The state also possesses abundant mineral resources like coal (48 million tonnes), limestone (380 million tonnes), dolomite (185 million tonnes), graphite (85 million tonnes), and quartzite (3.13 million tonnes).²¹ The Indian policy to develop Arunachal's hydro-electric potential is not lost on China. Recently, the Jindal Group joined the Arunachal Pradesh government to develop a 4,500 MW multi-purpose hydro-electric project believed to be largest power project in the country. In 2006, an agreement was signed with the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) for development of about 10,230 MW of hydro power.²² This policy thrust is not limited to Arunachal Pradesh. According to the *Hydro-Power Potential in the North East: Potential and Harnessing Analysis*, "the Brahmaputra and the Barak in Assam accounts for 31 per cent (586 out of 1,869 billion cubic meters) of the total average annual surface water and 42 per cent of the total 84,044 MW hydro-power potential of the country."²³ Already plans are on to develop

¹⁸ Sujit Dutta, "Revisiting China's Territorial Claims in Arunachal", *Strategic Analysis*, 32/4, 2008, pp. 549-581.

¹⁹ '96 pc Chinese against Indian visits to Arunachal', October 14, 2009 at <http://news.rediff.com/report/2009/oct/14/pc-chinese-against-indian-visits-to-arunachal.htm> (Accessed on July 8, 2010).

²⁰ David Barboza, "China Passes Japan as Second Largest Economy", *The New York Times*, August 15, 2010 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/business/global/16yuan.html> (Accessed on August 16, 2010).

²¹ "Economic Infrastructure of Arunachal Pradesh - Fast Facts" at <http://www.economywatch.com/stateprofiles/arunachalpradesh/economic-infrastructure.html> (Accessed on August 12, 2010).

²² Bikash Singh "Arunachal govt inks hydro-electric project deal with Jindal Group" August 04, 2009, at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/4857492.cms> (Accessed on July 09, 2010).

²³ Ibid.

the north-east as India's most viable source of green energy. Of the 72 schemes identified in the north-east, 42 were in Arunachal Pradesh alone. The two most prominent projects are 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri located near North Lakhimpur on the border of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and the 600 MW Kemeng Hydro-electric project of Neepco. When in 2003, the Prime Minister launched the 48,000 MW hydro-electric initiative as part of the *Mission 2012: Power for all*, out of the 162 major hydro-power schemes identified, 72 (45 per cent) with a total generation capacity of 32,000 MW (60 per cent of the total capacity addition envisaged) were located in the north-east.²⁴ With such abundant resources yet to be harnessed by India, China's continuing territorial claim could well be explained by its quest for resources.

Crafting an Indian Response

In response to China's aggressive posture in Arunachal Pradesh, three policy recommendations are offered as under:-

First, India must clearly state that while it has no offensive military desires, or a wish for any armed conflict with China, its defensive capabilities are optimal to deter any Chinese military move into its territory. In this context, India should strengthen its own inter-continental ballistic missiles as part of a credible nuclear deterrence posture *vis-à-vis* China. Building military infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh would also add credibility to the country's conventional deterrence posture. Through such defensive postures, India must 'signal' not only its commitment to defend Arunachal Pradesh in case of a military invasion but also ensure that China clearly understands that India's defensive force structures are credible. War games must be conducted and the results made public in order to act as postures of deterrence. Keeping its bilateral relations with the US and Russia robust is also a wise move *vis-à-vis* China.

Second, India's strength in Arunachal Pradesh is the popular support it enjoys amongst the local population.²⁵ Locals view China as an aggressive state and fear its policies towards its minorities.²⁶ They want India to be more pro-active, both politically and militarily, in Arunachal Pradesh. Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Rajiv Gandhi University in Arunachal

²⁴ Pratim Ranjan Bose, "Power: Deficit then, surplus now, exporter soon" at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2010/07/31/stories/2010073150821400.htm> (Accessed on August 13, 2010).

²⁵ "China's claim over Arunachal Pradesh is wrong: Dorjee Khandu" http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/chinas-claim-over-arunachal-pradesh-is-wrong-dorjee-khandu_100282906.html (Accessed on July 5, 2010).

²⁶ "The nowhere people", *The Telegraph*, June 03, 2007 at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070603/asp/7days/story_7868992.asp (Accessed on August 13, 2010).

Pradesh, Tamo Mibang, however, fears China's claim on Arunachal Pradesh especially since India is so careful in its handling of China. "But who is going to defend us if India, our country, doesn't?"²⁷ is his critical question. Added to his voice is that of Kanu Bagang, President of All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) who expresses disquiet over Delhi's evident lack of concern over the issue. "Why can't the central government come clean on Arunachal and make plain to China where we belong?"²⁸ Arunachalis believe that India could do much more than assert, once in a while, its sovereignty over the state in response to China's aggression. Locals also express fears regarding Chinese plans for diversions of the Yarlung Tsanpo (Brahmaputra in Assam and Meghna in Bangladesh), which they believe will have a negative impact on their livelihoods.²⁹ It is widely believed that China plans to harness not only the hydro-electric potential of the Yarlung Tsangpo but also divert the river to feed its water-scarce northern regions.

Third, India should continue to negotiate with China on the border dispute within the framework Agreement signed between the two countries on April 11, 2005.³⁰ However, given the different interpretations of the "settled" population issue, India should be patient in its negotiations with China and strictly stick to Article VII of the Agreement which states that "in reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas".³¹ In this context, India is of the firm view that any settlement of the border issue cannot involve uprooting of settled populations in Arunachal Pradesh.³²

In conclusion, if one were to rank the reasons behind China's territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh in order of priority, the two most plausible reasons are: China's Tibet policy and balancing India. The 'resources' argument occupies the backstage for now. Given that India's ties with the US will continue to grow stronger in the future, this factor will soon become the dominant irritant in India-China relations, relegating the Tibet issue to the second order. Consequently, China's aggressive posture on Arunachal Pradesh will increase in order to balance India. Hence, a robust defense posture holds the key for India at this juncture.

²⁷ "The nowhere people", *The Telegraph*, June 03, 2007 at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070603/asp/7days/story_7868992.asp (Accessed on August 13, 2010).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Arunachal Congress opposes Chinese dam" at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=may1410/oth05> (Accessed on August 6, 2010)

³⁰ For 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).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Pranab Dhal Samanta, "PM Draws the China Boundary Line: No Uprooting Settled Population", *The Indian Express*, November 22, 2006 at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/pm-draws-the-china-boundary-line-no-uprooting-settled-people/17071/0> (Accessed on October 20, 2010).