

Arunachal Pradesh – A Cause of Contention between India and China

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Abstract

Northeastern territory of India is the eastern frontier of the Indian Union. It a land of different ethnic, linguistic & cultural groups who have been following age old customs and traditions for long time in this region. The northeastern part of India consists of eight states and Arunachal Pradesh (earlier known as NEFA) is one among them. It shares international borders with Bhutan in the west, Myanmar in the east, and a disputed border with China (Indo-Tibet border) in the north at the McMahon Line. For a long time China has been establishing its claim over Arunachal Pradesh by rejecting the McMahan Line which determines a clear boundary line between India and China. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, most of Arunachal Pradesh was captured by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) (North East India - People, History and Culture). Since China is an aggressor country and always claims Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory, this creates a serious threat for India's northeastern border and particularly of Arunachal Pradesh. It is in this background the present paper is an attempt to examine Chinese claims over Arunachal Pradesh. The paper also deals with India-China relations and its implications for Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, India-China relations, India's Northeast, Tawang, Disputed Border.

Introduction

Northeastern territory of India is the eastern frontier of the Indian Union. It a land of different ethnic, linguistic & cultural groups who have been following age old customs and traditions for long time in this region. Earlier known as NEFA (the North East Frontier Agency), Arunachal Pradesh is one northeastern state of India. It shares international borders with Bhutan in the west, Myanmar in the east, and a disputed border with China (Indo-Tibet border) in the north at the McMahon Line. For a long time China has been establishing its claim over Arunachal Pradesh by rejecting the McMahan Line which determines a clear boundary line between India and China. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, most of Arunachal Pradesh was captured by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) (North East India - People, History and Culture). Since China is an aggressor country and always claims Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory, this creates a serious threat for India's northeastern border and particularly of Arunachal Pradesh. It is in this background the present paper is an attempt to examine Chinese claims over Arunachal Pradesh. The paper also deals with India-China relations and its implications for Arunachal Pradesh.

Objectives of the study

The paper mainly deals with two objectives,

- a) To examine Chinese claim over Arunachal Pradesh.
- b) To examine India-China relations and its implications for Arunachal Pradesh.

Methodology

The present study is completely based on secondary sources. For collecting data the researcher relied on various secondary sources such as books, journals, newspaper articles, government websites, maps, and internet and so on.

Arunachal Pradesh - The Easternmost state of the Indian Union

There are total eight federal states in the northeastern corner of India. Arunachal Pradesh is one among them. It was formed from the erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region, and became a full-fledged state on 20 February 1987. Arunachal Pradesh means “Land of the Dawn-Lit Mountains” (North East India - People, History and Culture). The state is also known as the “Orchid State of India” or the “Paradise of the Botanists”. People also call it as “the Land of Rising Sun”.

History of Arunachal Pradesh can be traced back to the Ahom rule in Assam in the 16th century. Modern history of Arunachal Pradesh begins with the annexation of northeast by the British after the Yandaboo Treaty (signed on 24 February 1826). In 1838 the British took possession of Assam and brought Arunachal Pradesh under their administrative control. After independence it was a part of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and in 1972 it became a Union Territory. On 20 February 1987 Arunachal Pradesh became a full-fledged state (24th) within the Indian Union (HISTORY OF NORTH EAST INDIA (1228 TO 1947)).

Importance of Arunachal Pradesh

Northeastern region of India has huge strategic and economic importance. Arunachal Pradesh is also very much significant in this regard and this can be understood by the following;

Arunachal Pradesh has huge forest and mineral resources such as oil, coal, graphite, mica, iron, copper etc (Arunachal Pradesh past and present). Coal reserve of the state comprising Namchik-Namphuk coal mine in Tirap district is estimated at about 900 lakh tonnes (North East India - People, History and Culture). The state has estimated oil reserve of around 15 lakh tonnes. Limestone deposit in Lohit district is estimated at about 910 tonnes. Regarding hydro power potential, the state is very much significant. The State has the potential to generate 50,000 MW of hydropower and thus hydropower has been the future of the State (Arunachal Pradesh past and present). It is because of this Arunachal Pradesh is regarded as the future powerhouse of India. There is a huge opportunity for the growth of cultural tourism, adventure tourism, historical tourism, wildlife tourism, nature based tourism and eco tourism in the state. Tawang monastery is very much significant for Tibetan Buddhists (Cultural and Historical background Arunachal Pradesh). The state of Arunachal Pradesh shares long international borders with Myanmar (520 km), China (1,080 km) and Bhutan (217 km). This makes the state strategically significant for India (North East India - People, History and Culture). Nampong, in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, could be a potential geo-economic corridor and it can promote India's economic relation with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and beyond. Tawang, a district in the west Arunachal Pradesh, could be a potential geo-economic corridor that can promote India-Bhutan economic relations. Kibithoo in Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh can provide an all-weather road to connect India's northeast with the Tibet Autonomous Region, Sichuan and Yunnan of China (Nampong will become gateway to Southeast Asia).

Arunachal Pradesh Border – A disputed border between India and China

The McMahon Line is the demarcation line between Tibet and British Raj which was agreed in the 1914 Simla Convention. India accepts the McMahon Line as a legal boundary line between India and Tibet but China often rejects the Simla Accord and the McMahon Line. For them Tibet was never a sovereign state and therefore did not have the power to conclude treaties. Therefore China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of the southern Tibet and a

part of the PRC. China also claims that it never signed the Simla Accord 1914. This makes Arunachal Pradesh border as a highly disputed border between India and China (october 2007).

India China relations and Implications over Arunachal Pradesh

Although modern relation between India and China was started with a friendly note by signing the “Panchasheel Treaty” in 1954 but since the establishment of independent India and the People’s Republic of China both have border dispute on two sides. The first is, Aksai Chin, administered by China as part of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Tibet Autonomous Region and claimed by India as part of the union territory of Ladakh (PROBLEMS OF BORDER AREAS IN NORTH EAST INDIA). The other disputed territory is south of the McMahon Line, formerly known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and now called Arunachal Pradesh (India—China Borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre).

For a long time China has been claiming about 90, 000 square kilometers of territory from India in the eastern sector (the total land area of Arunachal Pradesh is 83,743 sq. km). 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. Just days before Chinese Premier Hu Jintao’s state visit to India, in November 2006, Sun Yuxi, Chinese Ambassador to India held 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.” In June 2009, China tried to close 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. This was the first time when China brought its claim on Arunachal Pradesh in a multilateral forum. Further in October 2009, China criticised Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh during the campaign for the state assembly elections. Further in November 2009, China criticized the Dalai Lama’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh (encroachment-on-Indian-territory- ...). In 2020 five youths in Arunachal Pradesh, had been abducted by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from near the Arunachal border in Upper Subansiri district (China's Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh).

India’s Ministry of External Affairs reported in January 2021 about a village construction near the LAC (Line of Actual Control), on the banks of Tsari Chu river in Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh. This construction has been seen by Indian analysts as a move to establish China’s claim to the area by making civilian settlements in disputed frontier areas, which it has also done with Bhutan. In response to these developments PRC stated that China’s “position on Zangnan (or South Tibet, as China refers to Arunachal) region is consistent and clear”. “We never recognized the so-called Arunachal Pradesh.” It was further added that “China’s development and construction activities within our own territory is normal. This is beyond reproach as it is in our territory” (Construction of village in Arunachal Pradesh by China).

Reasons for growing Chinese Claim over Arunachal Pradesh

There are various reasons for growing claim over Arunachal Pradesh by the PRC. Dr. Namrata Goswami, a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi in her article “China’s Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh: Crafting an Indian Response” has identified three possible reasons in this regard. These are:-

1. Balancing India: Dr. Goswami pointed out that one important reason for the growing Chinese claim over Arunachal Pradesh is the growing India-US strategic partnership. China is dissatisfied about the ‘Next Steps in Strategic Partnership agreement in 2004, the ‘Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal in 2005’ and the “India-US Civil Nuclear Enabling Deal in 2008”. China interprets this relationship as a motive for ‘containment of China’. To curve this pressure China often raises its claim over Arunachal Pradesh.

2. Tibet Factor and ‘Lost’ Territories Argument: For Dr. Goswami, China’s territorial claim is further based on its Tibet policy and the “lost” territories argument. The Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama in the 17th century and is the second largest Tibetan monastery after Lhasa. China believes that India can use “Tibet Card” by providing assistance to the Dalai Lama to travel abroad and his speeches around the world will keep the Tibetan issue alive. Hence, China believes that its claim on Arunachal Pradesh will deter India from overplaying its Tibet card.

3. Quest for Resources: The PRC in the 21st century has becoming a great economic power and to sustain its economic growth in the long run, China’s quest for resources is increasing. Arunachal Pradesh is rich in forest and mineral resources such as oil, coal, graphite, mica, iron, copper etc. Coal reserve of the state is estimated at about 900 lakh tones. Estimated oil reserve in the state is 15 lakh tones. Limestone deposit in Lohit district is estimated at about 910 tones. The State has the potential to generate 50,000 MW of hydropower. There is a huge potential for development of cultural tourism, adventure tourism, historical tourism, wildlife tourism, nature based tourism and eco tourism. All these show the economic potential of Arunachal Pradesh and this is another possible reason for China’s territorial claim over this frontier state of India (Goswami).

India’s Response to Chinese Claim on Arunachal Pradesh

Since the PRC (People’s Republic of China) is an aggressor country and has been claiming over a large part of the northeast, it creates a serious threat for India’s security. To curve this security threat Indian Government has been doing much and this can be understood by the following.

In response to the Chinese civilian and military infrastructure development along the LAC, the Indian side has created a new Corp of the Indian Army for the Eastern Front but still lacks basic infrastructure like telephone connectivity, roads or railways. China has a railway station just 35km from the LAC. The nearest railway station on the Indian side is 200km away. The telephone towers of state-run BSNL are 40 to 50km away from the border. It makes intelligence gathering easy for the Chinese as its investment on LAC is up to the mark. Despite the above as of now, situation has changed and improved from Indian point of view. The Indian Armed Force is well-deployed and well-stocked to meet any kind of situation. It has set up an optical fibre network for its own communication in the border areas. Strong and long bridges have come on the Brahmaputra. Bhupen Hazarika Bridge is one such example (India Lacks Infrastructure Along The China Border). A 1703-km-long trans-Arunachal Pradesh highway and inter-valley road is in the underway. Bogibeel Bridge which is India’s longest road-rail bridge connecting Dibrugarh in Assam to Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh was inaugurated in 2018. Bogibeel River Bridge is the longest rail-cum-road bridge in India, measuring 4.94 kilometers over the Brahmaputra River. It is strategically significant for India (Annual Report).

Under the Act East Policy Indian government has been working on improving border infrastructure, especially on roads leading to forward areas in Arunachal Pradesh. The Ministry of Home Affairs, under its Indo-China Border Roads (ICBR) projects, has awarded six road stretches in Arunachal Pradesh to the National Highways Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) at an estimated cost of approximately Rs 5,000 crore (GUPTA). According to a report published in ‘The Print’, “As of now, our soldiers walk on foot for three to four days to reach some of the forward locations. Once the roads are built, it will take about 7-10 hours.” Besides the above in December 2020 the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), headed by Prime Minister, cleared a proposal for “development of critical infrastructure” in Arunachal Pradesh “at a cost of ₹1162.19 crore”. Work in these projects is in progress. In 2020 the Border Roads Organization (BRO) has constructed the Daporijo Bridge over Subansiri River in Arunachal Pradesh. The bridge is a strategic link towards the LAC between India and China. All supplies, rations, constructional material and medicines pass over this bridge. In 2019, the Defense Minister inaugurated the Sisseri River Bridge located at lower Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh. The 200m long bridge provides

connectivity between Dibang Valley and Siang. The bridge was constructed by 'Project Brahman' of Border Roads Organisation (BRO). This bridge is a part of Trans Arunachal Highway a ₹10,000-crore two-lane highway project that aimed to connect Tawang in the west to Kanubari in the east of Arunachal Pradesh. In 2019, the Indian Air Force inaugurated the advanced landing ground (ALG) at Vijaynagar (which is close to both Chinese as well as Myanmar border) in Changlang district. This is the eighth ALG made operational by the IAF since a ₹720-crore project received impetus in 2013. The others are at Aalo, Mechuka, Pasighat, Tawang, Tuting, Walong and Ziro (standing committee on defence). Besides the above there are a number of important Air Force Bases for fighter and helicopter operations in India's northeast. For example: in Sikkim an ALG at Pakyong (60 km from Indo-Tibet border), Air Force Bases at Tejpur, Chabua, Hashimara and Jorhat. The Indian Army conducts routine military exercises every year. In 2019, the Indian Army conducted exercise 'HimVijay' in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam with its newly created Integrated Battle Groups (IBG). Exercise HIM VIJAY was one such endeavor. IBG was created in 2018. It was created for a quicker and formidable launch of attack on the enemy. The IBG was established to meet modern warfare considering the military progress of the enemy threats. In 2020 the Union Defense Minister Rajnath Singh has virtually laid the foundation of a tunnel at Nechiphu (450m-long tunnel) on the Balipara-Chariduar-Tawang (BCT) road in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Another 1.8 km-long tunnel is also being constructed on the BCT road and both will reduce distance to the area bordering China by 10km (Parashar).

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that China's aggressive nature is a big threat for India's northeastern border's security and particularly of Arunachal Pradesh because it shares a long border with hostile China. Although China is claiming over a large part of the northeast, particularly Arunachal Pradesh and also doing infrastructure developments near the LAC, the government of India is also working hard to counter such Chinese claims and developments. To ensure security of India's northeast and particularly of Arunachal Pradesh the government of India has been working on development of rail network, road network, air connectivity etc. Besides the above India needs to focus on permanent solution of border dispute with China and for this peaceful negotiation is important. India also needs to improve its economic relation with China because economic interest of China will help India to bring the PRC on table for discussion of border issue and other matters (Defence Minister inaugurates Nechiphu Tunnel in Arunachal). Besides the above overall development of Northeastern states and particularly of Arunachal Pradesh is also essential for ensuring security and development of Arunachal Pradesh and other states of India's northeast.

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