

Territorial Contestation and Border Politics in Arunachal Pradesh: A Strategic Perspective

Diki Lingo

Full-Time Teacher, ISSE, Government of Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract

This paper analyses territorial contestation and border politics in Arunachal Pradesh within the broader context of India-China relations. It examines the historical background of the McMahon Line, the strategic and symbolic significance of Tawang, China's claims over Arunachal Pradesh, India's constitutional and administrative control, recent border infrastructure projects, and the role of frontier communities in strengthening sovereignty. The study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, official statements, government documents and policy reports. Through historical analysis and thematic content analysis, the dispute is treated as a multi-layered borderland issue rather than a simple cartographic disagreement. The paper argues that India's position in Arunachal Pradesh is strengthened by administrative continuity, democratic participation, infrastructure development, military preparedness and integration with local communities, whereas China's claim-making relies largely on historical reinterpretation, symbolic geography and diplomatic signalling. The study suggests that long-term stability in Arunachal Pradesh requires a balanced approach that combines defence readiness, consistent diplomacy, environmental care, sustainable development and inclusive frontier governance.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, India-China boundary dispute, Tawang, McMahon Line, frontier governance, border infrastructure, strategic geography, sovereignty, Line of Actual Control

Introduction

Territorial claims continue to shape contemporary geopolitics, especially in regions where boundary-making, strategic geography, national identity and military modernisation intersect. In the twenty-first century, borders are not merely lines those separate sovereign territories, they are also sites of political assertion, infrastructure competition, population management and symbolic statecraft. In Asia, contested frontiers have become more significant because of the rise of Chinese power, increasing strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, and the securitisation of connectivity, infrastructure and border populations.

Arunachal Pradesh occupies a pivotal position in the eastern sector of the India-China boundary dispute. India regards the state as an integral part of its territory, while China has repeatedly

*Corresponding Author Email: dikilingo107@gmail.com

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referred to the region, particularly Tawang, as part of “South Tibet”. The dispute is therefore not limited to cartography. It involves historical claims, Tibetan cultural geography, the McMahon Line, military access, infrastructure development, diplomatic signalling and competing narratives of sovereignty.

The Tawang sector is especially sensitive because of its religious, cultural and strategic significance. Incidents along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), including the Yangtse incident of 9 December 2022, show that the eastern sector remains vulnerable to calibrated military pressure. At the same time, China's attempts to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh have been rejected by India as efforts to create an alternative cartographic and discursive claim over the territory.

Recent developments have increased Arunachal Pradesh's prominence in India's border policy. The Sela Tunnel, dedicated to the nation on 9 March 2024, provides an all-weather link on the Tezpur-Tawang axis and has strategic value for defence preparedness and socio-economic development. Similarly, the Vibrant Villages Programme-I, approved on 15 February 2023, seeks the holistic development of selected villages in northern border states, including Arunachal Pradesh.

Existing scholarship has discussed the historical origins of the boundary dispute, the implications of the 1962 war and the wider trajectory of India-China relations. However, much of this literature focuses on Ladakh, military stand-offs and bilateral crisis management. Arunachal Pradesh is often treated as a peripheral frontier rather than as a strategic borderland with its own political, cultural, ecological and developmental concerns. This creates a research gap in understanding how territorial claims, symbolic politics, infrastructure, local communities and strategic communication intersect in Arunachal Pradesh.

This paper examines Arunachal Pradesh not only as a contested territory but also as an active strategic borderland. It argues that sovereignty in the region is produced through a combination of military readiness, constitutional integration, democratic participation, infrastructure, local identity and diplomatic consistency. The study contributes to frontier studies and the geopolitics of South Asia by explaining why Arunachal Pradesh will remain central to India's national security, China policy and border development strategy in the coming decade.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical and geopolitical roots of territorial contestation in Arunachal Pradesh, especially with reference to the McMahon Line and Tawang.
2. To analyse India's administrative continuity, constitutional integration, democratic participation, military preparedness and frontier development in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. To assess China's symbolic claim-making, cartographic assertions and diplomatic signalling in relation to Arunachal Pradesh.
4. To suggest a balanced border-governance approach that integrates national security, diplomatic consistency, ecological sensitivity and local participation.

Literature Review

The literature on Arunachal Pradesh lies at the intersection of India-China border studies, strategic geography, colonial cartography, Tibetan studies and Himalayan geopolitics. A central issue in this scholarship is the McMahon Line, proposed at the 1914 Simla Convention between British India and Tibet. India's position rests on the colonial legacy of administrative boundaries and the subsequent constitutional integration of Arunachal Pradesh. China objects to the Simla settlement and argues that Tibet did not possess independent treaty-making authority. This historical literature is important for understanding the eastern sector, although it often pays limited attention to local social dynamics.

A second body of literature treats Arunachal Pradesh as a strategic borderland. Scholars in this tradition emphasise the long India-China frontier, the proximity of Bhutan and Myanmar, the region's role as a buffer for North-East India, and the enduring impact of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Madhuri (2024), for instance, describes Arunachal Pradesh as a flashpoint where India's legal claim based on the McMahon Line confronts Chinese military and infrastructural advances. Such analysis is useful, but it often remains state-centric and does not fully consider the lived experience of border communities under conditions of militarisation, surveillance, road-building and symbolic sovereignty.

A third stream of scholarship focuses on cultural and symbolic questions associated with Tawang. Chinese narratives frequently refer to Tibetan Buddhist linkages, including historical exchanges of monks, traders and religious literature between Tawang and Tibet. Indian scholars and policy analysts, however, distinguish cultural-religious contact from political sovereignty. Goswami (2011) shows through local perspectives that historical connections with Lhasa did not automatically imply Chinese administrative control. This distinction is significant because cultural affinity may be used for geopolitical claim-making, but it cannot by itself determine territorial sovereignty.

Recent literature increasingly examines Arunachal Pradesh through the lens of infrastructure, development and state-building. Kalden and Ganguly (2025) argue that roads, telecommunication, education and frontier development have both welfare and strategic dimensions, as they reinforce the sovereign presence of the Indian state. Development therefore functions not only as an economic intervention but also as a strategic practice that helps retain population, strengthen logistics, increase state visibility and counter rival infrastructure along the LAC. At the same time, scholars caution that infrastructure can create ecological stress, livelihood disruption and securitisation if local participation is not meaningfully incorporated.

Conflict-resolution literature places the Arunachal question within the larger framework of India-China diplomatic relations. Bai (2012) argues that mistrust, symbolic attachment to territory and the absence of a clearly demarcated LAC restrict bargaining possibilities. Gokhale (2023) and Pal (2022) further show that the post-Galwan environment has altered Indian perceptions of Chinese border behaviour. These studies are important, but they often treat the boundary question mainly as a bilateral issue. This paper builds on the existing scholarship by linking territorial contestation with borderland governance, local identity, infrastructure and daily practices of sovereignty in Arunachal Pradesh.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design because the subject requires interpretation of history, geopolitical claims, policy narratives, official statements, symbolic politics and community-related dimensions. These aspects cannot be adequately examined through numerical methods alone.

The study is based on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, policy papers, government publications, Press Information Bureau releases, Ministry of External Affairs statements, strategic documents and institutional reports. Sources were selected according to their relevance to the India-China boundary dispute, the McMahon Line, Tawang, border infrastructure development and post-Galwan India-China relations, with specific attention to Arunachal Pradesh.

The paper uses historical analysis to trace the dispute from the colonial frontier and the Simla Convention of 1914 to the 1962 war, the integration of NEFA into India, bilateral border agreements, recent infrastructure projects and the Yangtse incident of 2022. It also applies thematic content analysis to examine historical-legal claims, symbolic geography, Chinese assertions, Indian integration, infrastructure, border communities, ecology and diplomacy.

Analysis and Discussion

The Arunachal Pradesh question is not only straightforward territorial dispute between India and China but also a complex and multi-dimensional struggle involving history, law, geopolitics, military geography, infrastructure, symbolic claims, cartography, diplomacy and local borderland governance. The contest is fought at material, legal, military, diplomatic and discursive levels. China's diplomatic and cartographic assertions, including the use of terms such as “Zangnan” or “South Tibet”, are countered by India's administrative consolidation, border infrastructure, military preparedness, local development and diplomatic rejection of Chinese claims.

The historical dimension is central to the controversy, India's position in the eastern sector is rooted in the McMahon Line of the 1914 Simla Convention and the administrative continuity exercised over the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), later Arunachal Pradesh. China rejects the McMahon Line because it argues that Tibet lacked treaty-making capacity under colonial conditions. However, historical claims alone cannot determine present sovereignty. India strengthens its case through constitutional incorporation, continuous administration, democratic participation and the daily functioning of state institutions.

Tawang is the most sensitive and symbolically charged location in this dispute. Its importance derives from military geography, Buddhist heritage, historical memory and diplomatic symbolism. For India, Tawang is significant because of its elevation, proximity to Tibet, closeness to the LAC and its association with the 1962 war. China uses the Tibetan Buddhist links of Tawang Monastery and the association with the Sixth Dalai Lama to construct a symbolic territorial claim. India, by contrast, bases its position on administrative continuity, territorial integrity, constitutionalism and local loyalty.

The so-called “Palm and Five Fingers” theory (China’s boarder strategic imagination) is also relevant as an interpretive framework, According to this formulation, Tibet is described as the “palm”, while Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh are described as the “five fingers”. Whether or not this was ever an official Chinese doctrine remains debated, but it is analytically useful because Chinese pressure across the Himalayan arc often links Tibet, Ladakh, Bhutan, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh within a broader strategic pattern. In Arunachal Pradesh, the phrase “South Tibet” connects Chinese claims to the Tibetan question. India rejects this and maintains that Arunachal Pradesh has always been, and will remain, an integral part of India.

The Siliguri Corridor, often called the “Chicken Neck”, further widens the strategic significance of the Arunachal issue. This narrow corridor in northern West Bengal connects mainland India with the North-East and lies near Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Chumbi Valley. Its importance as India's logistical and strategic gateway to Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and the wider North-East makes it a critical vulnerability. Any instability affecting this corridor could influence military movement, trade, civilian connectivity and national security.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also shape the broader geopolitical environment. Although BRI is not directly related to the Arunachal dispute, its indirect impact is significant because it expands China's strategic influence around India's neighbourhood. India's strongest objection is to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which passes through territory claimed by India. BRI projects in Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar create a wider pattern of Chinese connectivity diplomacy and regional leverage. Arunachal Pradesh therefore needs to be analysed not only through the LAC but also within the broader context of China's infrastructure and influence-building strategies in South Asia.

Infrastructure has become a crucial factor in the present phase of the dispute. Roads, tunnels, bridges, advanced landing grounds, telecommunication networks, border villages and surveillance systems are no longer only development assets, they are also instruments of strategic statecraft. The Sela Tunnel strengthens all-weather connectivity to Tawang, improves troop mobility and supports socio-economic development. The Vibrant Villages Programme treats border settlements as viable strategic spaces rather than peripheral habitations. These measures help India enhance security preparedness and reinforce territorial legitimacy.

At the same time, infrastructure development has limits and risks. Improved connectivity can support tourism, public services, markets, emergency response and population retention, but hasty construction may also increase militarisation, ecological stress and livelihood disruption. Arunachal Pradesh lies in a sensitive Himalayan environment where unplanned projects can increase landslide risks, disturb habitats and create resentment among tribal communities. Border development must therefore be linked with environmental assessment, disaster-risk planning, livelihood protection, tribal consultation and respect for customary rights.

The Yangtse incident of 9 December 2022 shows that the eastern sector remains an active space of contestation along the LAC. The attempted transgression by PLA troops in the Tawang sector, and India's response, indicate that Tawang is operationally sensitive as well as symbolically contested. The incident also suggests that diplomatic arrangements and

confidence-building measures have not fully prevented localised military friction. Similarly, repeated Chinese attempts to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh represent incursions into cartographic and narrative space. Such acts do not alter ground realities, but they attempt to normalise an alternative geopolitical vocabulary.

Indian leadership statements and technology-oriented border initiatives have also strengthened India's counter-narrative. The declaration that even an inch of Indian territory cannot be encroached upon, made from a border area such as Kibithoo, functioned as a symbolic assertion of sovereignty. The use of drones, advanced cameras and surveillance technology also reflects India's shift from passive defence to integrated frontier governance, combining infrastructure, surveillance, local development and military preparedness.

The local factor remains central to India's resilience in Arunachal Pradesh. Border communities are not merely inhabitants of a strategic zone, they are voters, cultural actors, traders and participants in the everyday consolidation of territory. A populated, connected and politically integrated borderland is more resilient than an empty militarised frontier. However, this resilience depends on trust, participatory governance and sensitivity towards tribal rights, ecology and livelihoods.

Table 1: Timeline of Historical Development of Territorial Contestation and Border Politics in Arunachal Pradesh

Period/Year	Historical Development	Strategic Significance
Pre-colonial period	Present-day Arunachal Pradesh was inhabited by indigenous tribes and local chieftaincies. Tawang had cultural and religious links with Tibet, especially through Tibetan Buddhism and the Tawang Monastery, but these links did not necessarily mean direct Chinese administrative control.	This period is important because China later used Tibet-related cultural and religious links to support its claim, while India and local perspectives distinguish cultural contact from political sovereignty.
Late 19th-early 20th century	British India gradually expanded its administrative influence in the eastern Himalayan frontier to secure the northeastern border and trade routes. The area later came to be known as the North-East Frontier Agency, or NEFA.	This phase laid the foundation for colonial frontier administration and later postcolonial boundary claims.
1914	The Simla Convention was held among British India, Tibet and China. Sir Henry McMahon proposed the McMahon Line as the boundary between British India and Tibet. Tibet	The McMahon Line became the core legal and cartographic basis of India's claim in the eastern sector, while China's non-recognition

	accepted the boundary, but China did not sign the final agreement.	became the basis of continuing contestation.
Late 1930s	British India began stronger administrative activity in parts of the eastern Himalayan frontier. Some sources note that administrative posts were established in selected areas such as Tawang around 1938.	This strengthened India's later argument of administrative continuity, although British control in the frontier remained limited and uneven.
1947	India became independent and inherited the British Indian administrative and territorial framework, including NEFA and the McMahon Line as the eastern boundary.	This made the dispute a postcolonial sovereignty issue, with India relying on inherited boundaries and administrative succession.
1949-1951	The People's Republic of China was established in 1949, and China asserted control over Tibet in 1950-51.	Tibet's changed political status transformed the Himalayan frontier into a direct India-China boundary issue.
1954	India published official maps showing the McMahon Line as its international boundary. During the same period, India and China promoted the Panchsheel framework, though border disagreements soon intensified.	This phase shows the contradiction between diplomatic goodwill and unresolved territorial claims.
1962	The Sino-Indian War broke out. Chinese forces crossed the McMahon Line in the eastern sector and temporarily occupied parts of NEFA, including Tawang, before withdrawing.	The war permanently shaped Indian strategic thinking, border militarisation and the perception of Arunachal Pradesh as a vulnerable strategic frontier.
21 January 1972	NEFA was reconstituted as the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh.	This marked a major administrative step in India's integration of the frontier into its constitutional structure.
20 February 1987	Arunachal Pradesh became a full-fledged state of India.	Statehood strengthened India's political and constitutional claim by integrating Arunachal Pradesh into the federal structure.

1993	India and China signed the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control.	This created a formal framework for managing the unresolved border, though it did not settle the boundary dispute.
1996	India and China signed confidence-building measures relating to military activities along the LAC.	The agreement attempted to reduce the risk of military escalation, but differences in LAC perception persisted.
2003	India and China appointed Special Representatives to address the boundary question.	This upgraded the dispute-resolution process to a higher political level, but a final settlement remained elusive.
2005	India and China agreed on political parameters and guiding principles for boundary settlement.	This was an important diplomatic step, but it did not remove disagreement over Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang.
2009	China objected to India's Country Partnership Strategy at the Asian Development Bank because it included funding connected with Arunachal Pradesh. India maintained that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India.	The dispute moved beyond the bilateral arena into multilateral development financing, showing how territorial claims affect development policy.
2011	Field-based local-perspective research recorded that many local communities in Arunachal Pradesh did not accept China's claim and supported stronger democratic governance and border defence.	This highlighted the importance of local identity and public opinion in sovereignty politics.
2020	The Galwan crisis occurred in the western sector of the India-China boundary, reshaping India's wider assessment of Chinese border behaviour.	Although outside Arunachal Pradesh, it influenced India's strategic approach across the entire LAC, including the eastern sector.
9 December 2022	PLA troops attempted to transgress the LAC in the Yangtse area of the Tawang sector, according to India's Defence Minister's statement in Parliament. Indian troops contested	The incident confirmed that Tawang remains an active flashpoint in the eastern sector.

	the attempt and both sides suffered injuries.	
15 February 2023	The Government of India approved Vibrant Villages Programme-I for the comprehensive development of select villages in northern border areas, including Arunachal Pradesh.	Border development became a strategic instrument for population retention, connectivity and sovereign presence.
9 March 2024	The Sela Tunnel was dedicated to the nation. Constructed by the Border Roads Organisation at about 13,000 feet, it improves connectivity on the Tezpur-Tawang axis.	It strengthens all-weather access to the Tawang sector and improves India's logistical capacity in a sensitive frontier zone.
2024 onwards	China continued to object to Indian activities and claims in Arunachal Pradesh, while India rejected Chinese claims and reiterated that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral and inalienable part of India.	This reflects the present phase of the dispute, where infrastructure, diplomatic signalling, cartographic assertion and sovereignty narratives operate together.

Source: Compiled by the author from Government of India, MEA and PIB records.

The timeline shows how historical claims, cartographic assertions, infrastructure development, military sensitivity, local integration and India's responses to Chinese pressure together shape territorial contestation and border politics in Arunachal Pradesh.

Conclusion

The study concludes that territorial contestation in Arunachal Pradesh is a comprehensive strategic issue involving historical claims, geopolitical rivalry, border infrastructure, military preparedness, local identity and symbolic politics. The dispute is less about a single line of demarcation and more about sovereignty, legitimacy and influence in the eastern Himalayan border region.

Tawang remains the most sensitive sector because history, religion, military geography and diplomacy converge there. India's position has been reinforced through constitutional extension, continuous administration of NEFA and Arunachal Pradesh, democratic participation, local integration and development programmes. China's position depends more on historical revisionism, symbolic geography, cartographic assertions and political posturing. The analysis also shows that infrastructure has become a crucial part of Indian border policy, as roads, tunnels, communication systems and border village programmes enhance both connectivity and defence preparedness.

However, the strategic significance of Arunachal Pradesh should not come at the cost of local communities or the Himalayan environment. Sustainable border policy must combine security readiness, inclusive governance, environmental sensitivity, local trust-building and diplomatic

consistency. Arunachal Pradesh is therefore not merely a disputed frontier; it is a strategic borderland continuously produced through administration, development, defence preparedness and the active participation of its people.

Suggestions

Border infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh should be strengthened in an eco-socially responsible manner. Roads, tunnels, telecommunication networks, logistics facilities and hydropower projects should be planned with environmental assessment, disaster-risk evaluation and consultation with local communities.

Education, healthcare, livelihood security, tourism, market access and employment generation should remain central to frontier governance so that border populations are not passive objects of security policy but active participants in national integration.

The Government of India should maintain a firm and consistent position on Arunachal Pradesh and respond to cartographic or nomenclature-driven claims with historical, legal and policy documentation.

Greater investment is required in surveillance technology, early-warning systems, border intelligence and civil-military coordination. However, this should not result in excessive militarisation of civilian spaces.

Future research should include field-based studies on tribes, local identity, ecological vulnerability, migration, tourism, livelihood changes and the lived experiences of people in the contested borderland. The future stability of Arunachal Pradesh depends on balancing national security with diplomacy, development with environment, and state policy with local confidence.

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