

Arunachal Pradesh in Indo-China Relations: Historical Roots, Contention, Security and Pathways for Peace

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Abstract

India and China, two rising Asian powers, share one of the world's most complex and contested borders. Among all disputed regions, Arunachal Pradesh remains the most politically sensitive, historically contested and symbolically charged issue in bilateral relations. China claims nearly all of Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet," while India considers the state an integral and inalienable part of its sovereign territory. The dispute involves issues of history, identity, nationalism, territoriality, military strategy, civilization narratives and international geopolitics. This article explores the historical roots of the disagreement, examines the strategic and geopolitical significance of Arunachal Pradesh for countries, analyses diplomatic tensions and military stand-offs, security and presents possible pathways toward resolution. It further evaluates international law, confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs), multilateral frameworks, border management reforms, and the challenges of political trust. The study concludes by proposing a set of pragmatic, multi-layered conflict-mitigation strategies that offer the most realistic prospects for long-term peace between India and China.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Border Disputes, Confidence Building Mechanisms, Geopolitics, Security.

Introduction

The bilateral relationship between India and China is shaped by cooperation and competition, mutual suspicion and intermittent diplomatic engagement. Despite shared membership in international forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the relationship has been marred by recurring tensions along the disputed boundary. While the Ladakh sector has increasingly drawn global attention following the 2020 Galwan clash, the Eastern Sector particularly Arunachal Pradesh remains the longest-standing and most symbolically sensitive point of contention. Arunachal Pradesh located in the eastern Himalayas, borders Tibet (China), Bhutan and Myanmar. China's claim dates back to its historical interpretation of Tibetan jurisdiction prior to 1914 and its rejection of the McMahon Line, drawn during the 1914 Simla Convention between British India and Tibet. India, on the other hand, asserts historical continuity, administrative control, democratic integration and legal sovereignty over the region. The dispute is not merely territorial. It encompasses cultural heritage, national identity, control over Himalayan watersheds, military strategy and influence in Southeast and South Asia. The region is also home to diverse Indigenous groups whose cultural and political identities add additional layers to the conflict. This article analyses key dimensions of the tension, including historical claims, geopolitical stakes, military factors, diplomatic developments and the potential for conflict resolution. While a final settlement remains elusive, there are several pathways for reducing tensions and fostering long-term stability.

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Research Objectives

- To examine the historical evolution of the Indo-China dispute over Arunachal Pradesh between India and China.
- To analyze the geopolitical, strategic, security and military significance of Arunachal Pradesh for both the countries.
- To understand the impact on bilateral relations and regional stability of both the countries.
- To understand the major diplomatic efforts, agreements and negotiations undertaken by India and China to resolve the issue of Arunachal Pradesh
- To explore possible solutions and confidence building measures for peaceful solutions for reducing tensions and resolving the dispute in the long term.

Research Questions

- What historical and political events and territorial agreements have shaped the competing claims of India and China over Arunachal Pradesh?
- How does Arunachal Pradesh hold geopolitical, strategic, security and military importance for both countries?
- What are the possible impacts on bilateral relations and regional stability of both the countries?
- What are the major diplomatic efforts, agreements and negotiations undertaken by India and China to resolve the issue of Arunachal Pradesh
- What potential solutions exist for resolving the Arunachal Pradesh dispute and how can they contribute to long-term peace and stability?

Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research design suitable for analyzing historical, political and diplomatic processes. The methods include:

- **Research Design**

A qualitative, descriptive and analytical design is adopted to explore the complex political, historical and strategic dimensions of the dispute.

- **Data Sources**

The study relies entirely on secondary data, gathered from: Academic journal articles, books, government documents and white papers, official press releases from the Ministry of External Affairs (India) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), International treaties and agreements, Reports from think tanks such as ORF, IDSA, Brookings and Carnegie, verified news analyses and map records and border documentation.

- **Data Collection Method**

A systematic review of literature was conducted using:

Digital academic databases (JSTOR, Google Scholar, ResearchGate), official government archives, international boundary maps and historical treaty sources, Also reports from strategic studies and institutions were also studied.

- **Data Analysis Technique**

The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes such as history, strategy, diplomacy, conflict and solutions. Comparative analysis of Indian and Chinese official perspectives, contextual historical analysis to understand pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence claims and interpretative analysis to assess the strategic motivations of both countries were done.

- **Limitations of the Study**

Restricted accesses to classified military or diplomatic documents were there because of which the study relies mostly on publicly available secondary sources. There might be a possible political bias in official statements of both countries. Rapid geopolitical developments may be there that may change the dynamics of the dispute.

- **Ethical Considerations**

Only publicly available, ethically sourced documents were used. No private information or sensitive government records were accessed.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the Arunachal Pradesh dispute is grounded in key theories of International Relations, namely Realism, Constructivism, Geopolitics and the Security Dilemma. These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a multidimensional understanding of the conflict by explaining state behavior, identity formation, power competition and persistent mistrust.

- **Realism**

From a realist perspective, the Arunachal Pradesh dispute is primarily driven by concerns over power, security, and survival in an anarchic international system. Both India and China view territorial control as essential to national security and strategic advantage. The militarization of the border, infrastructure development and force deployments reflect realist assumptions that states must rely on self-help to protect their interests. Arunachal Pradesh, due to its strategic depth and proximity to sensitive regions, becomes a vital asset in the balance of power between the two states.

- **Constructivism**

Constructivist theory emphasizes the role of ideas, identities and historical narratives in shaping state behavior. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, competing national identities and historical interpretations play a crucial role. China's claim of "South Tibet" is closely linked to its narrative of territorial integrity and historical unity, while India's stance is rooted in constitutional sovereignty and post-colonial nation-building. These socially constructed narratives reinforce rigid positions and make compromise politically sensitive, demonstrating how identity and perception shape the dispute.

- **Geopolitics**

Geopolitical theory highlights the influence of geography, terrain and spatial factors on political power. Arunachal Pradesh's mountainous terrain, control of river systems and strategic location along the Himalayan frontier enhance its geopolitical significance. For India, the region acts as a defensive buffer, while for China it represents a sensitive frontier linked to Tibet's stability. Geopolitical competition thus intensifies the dispute, as control over space translates into strategic leverage and regional influence.

- **Security Dilemma**

The security dilemma provides a critical lens to understand recurring tensions along the India–China border. Measures taken by one side to enhance its security such as troop deployments, infrastructure expansion or patrols are often perceived as threatening by the other, prompting countermeasures. This cycle of action and reaction perpetuates mistrust and heightens the risk of escalation, even in the absence of aggressive intent. The Arunachal Pradesh dispute exemplifies how unresolved boundaries can institutionalize insecurity between neighboring states. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive analytical foundation for understanding the persistence of the Arunachal Pradesh dispute and for evaluating policy options aimed at conflict resolution and long-term stability.

Discussion

Historical Background of the Dispute

- **Pre-colonial and early historical context**

The eastern Himalayan region has historically witnessed fluctuating spheres of influence involving Tibet, local tribal polities and British administrations. China's claim relies largely on Tibetan administrative presence in the Tawang region in earlier centuries. Buddhist religion influenced, particularly from Tibetan Buddhist institutions, extended into certain regions in Arunachal Pradesh. However, administrative control was minimal, fragmented and non-continuous. Indigenous tribes largely governed themselves autonomously.

- **The 1914 Simla Convention and the McMahon Line**

The Simla Convention attempted to negotiate boundaries between British India, Tibet and China. The Chinese government rejected the agreement, calling Tibet incapable of independent treaty negotiations. Nevertheless, British India proceeded to formalize the McMahon Line, which demarcated the boundary in the Eastern Sector. India considers the McMahon Line a legally valid international boundary inherited after independence.

China argues that

- Tibet lacked treaty-making authority.
- The British unilaterally imposed the boundary.
- The Simla Convention is therefore invalid.

- **Developments post-1947**

After the People's Republic of China (PRC) incorporated Tibet, border disputes began intensifying. China started claiming areas south of the McMahon Line. India established a civil administration in NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency), which became the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. The 1959 Tibetan uprising and India granting asylum to the Dalai Lama further strained relations. Border skirmishes escalated due to mutual mistrust.

Sino-Indian War of 1962: The 1962 war remains a watershed moment. China temporarily occupied parts of Arunachal Pradesh, including Tawang before withdrawing to pre-war positions. Although China's withdrawal helped stabilize the line, unresolved claims continued to fuel diplomatic tensions.

China's Position on Arunachal Pradesh: China refers to Arunachal Pradesh as Zangnan or South Tibet. China claims Tawang was historically part of Tibetan ecclesiastical administration, therefore constituting Chinese territory after China's assertion over Tibet.

Cultural and religious narratives: Beijing asserts that important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, especially Tawang, are central to Tibetan identity and therefore linked to China's cultural domain.

- **Strategic Considerations**

Control over Arunachal Pradesh would secure China's vulnerable southern flank, create depth for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), ensure control of routes leading to the Assam plains and enhance China's position in the Himalayan region.

- **Domestic Nationalism**

Territorial claims reinforce political legitimacy in China. Compromise is often portrayed domestically as a sign of weakness, making negotiations politically difficult.

India's Position on Arunachal Pradesh

India asserts a strong, consistent and legally grounded claim on validity of the McMahon Line. India considers the McMahon Line a legitimate boundary negotiated with Tibet, which exercised de facto independence at the time.

- **Administrative and Political Integration**

Arunachal Pradesh has been under India's continuous administration, is a fully democratic state with elected representatives and is home to citizens who overwhelmingly identify as Indian.

- **Cultural and Historical Arguments**

Although Tibetan influence existed, the region historically belonged to local tribes and polities, not to imperial China.

- **Strategic Concerns**

Arunachal Pradesh is vital for the defence of the northeast and protection of the Siliguri Corridor has significance in India's eastern Himalayan military posture.

Both the countries have maintained their respective claims, using history, cartography and nationalism to justify their positions. Domestic political considerations further complicate compromise as territorial issues are closely linked to national identity and legitimacy in both states.

The geopolitical, strategic, security and military significance of Arunachal Pradesh for both the countries

Arunachal Pradesh holds immense strategic value due to its location, terrain and proximity to sensitive regions. For India, the state serves as a critical buffer against potential Chinese advances and is vital for the security of the entire northeastern region. Control over high-altitude terrain and mountain passes provides strategic depth and surveillance advantages. Additionally, Arunachal Pradesh is rich in natural resources, including water, forests and hydropower potential which are crucial for regional development. For China, Arunachal Pradesh is significant due to its linkage with Tibet. Beijing perceives

Indian control over the region as a strategic vulnerability and fears that it could encourage separatist sentiments in Tibet. Control or influence over the area would enhance China's strategic posture along its southwestern frontier and provide leverage in broader Sino-Indian relations. Geopolitically, the dispute intersects with larger regional dynamics, including India's partnerships with other powers and China's ambitions under initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiatives. The unresolved boundary thus became a symbol of strategic rivalry and competing visions of regional order. There is military importance of the region. Arunachal Pradesh contains several vital mountain passes. China's claim over Tawang is located close to the critical Sela and Bum La passes which poses major security concerns. The state act as buffer zone for the country. India views Arunachal as a natural buffer protecting the northeast. China considers the Tibetan Plateau its strategic shield, which should extend southward.

- **Regional Power Competition**

Arunachal Pradesh increasingly reflects wider Indo-Pacific tensions involving the United States, Quad, India's Act East Policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

- **Escalation of Tensions**

There is infrastructure race between both the countries especially in the border area. Both countries have accelerated border infrastructure construction. China has built roads, railways, villages near Line of Actual Control (LAC). India has also expanded its highways, tunnels and airstrips. There is always a fear of escalation of conflicts or wars.

- **Frequent Military Encounters**

Although no major conflict has occurred since 1962 in this sector, several tense standoffs have happened, including 1987 Sumdorong Chu incident, 2016–17 Doklam (indirectly affecting Arunachal Pradesh) and multiple incursions are reported annually.

- **China's Renaming Policy**

China periodically renames villages and locations in Arunachal Pradesh to assert sovereignty. India rejects these moves as "invented".

- **Visa and Diplomatic Disputes**

China issues stapled visas to residents of Arunachal Pradesh and sometimes criticize Indian leaders' visits to the region. And at the same time India maintains sovereign right over its territory.

Impact on bilateral relations and regional stability between both the countries

The Arunachal Pradesh dispute has consistently constrained the development of trust between India and China. Periodic border standoffs, military build-ups and diplomatic protests reinforce perceptions of threat and hostility. Even when economic ties expand, the shadow of the boundary dispute limits the scope of strategic cooperation. The regional level, persistent tensions undermine stability in the Himalayan belt, increasing the risk of miscalculation and escalation. The militarization of border areas diverts resources from development and imposes environmental and social costs. For local communities, the disputes generate uncertainty, restrict mobility and affects livelihoods, while also fostering strong territorial attachment and nationalism. The dispute also has broader implications for Asian security. As two nuclear –armed states with global ambitions, India and China's inability to resolve their differences raises concerns about conflict management and the effectiveness of existing confidence-building mechanisms.

The major diplomatic efforts, agreements and negotiations undertaken by India and China to resolve the issue of Arunachal Pradesh

Attempts at Negotiation:

- In 1988 Rajiv Gandhi visited China. The visit did not solve the issue of Arunachal Pradesh but it helped in preventing China from dominating bilateral ties.
- 1993 and 1996 Border Peace Agreements
- These agreements established CBMs, communication channels and rules to prevent escalation.
- 2005 Political Parameters Agreement

This provides a framework for managing border disputes for both the countries fostering overall bilateral relations.

- **2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement**
It aimed at improving communication and reducing troop tensions.
- **Special Representatives Talks**
Although numerous rounds have been held, progress remains limited due to fundamental disagreements.

Possible Solutions: Pathways Toward Peace

Despite deep-rooted challenges, several pathways exist for addressing the Arunachal Pradesh dispute. One approach is the pursuit of a negotiated settlement based on mutual compromise and recognition of ground realities. While politically difficult, incremental adjustments and a package deal covering the entire boundary could offer a long-term solution. Alternatively, both sides could focus on managing the dispute rather than resolving it immediately. Strengthening confidence-building measures, such as clearer protocols for border patrols, enhanced communication mechanisms and regular high-level dialogue, can reduce the risk of confrontation. Joint development initiatives and environmental cooperation in border areas could transform zones of contestation into spaces of collaboration. People-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges can also play a role in reducing mutual mistrust. Encouraging academic dialogue, tourism and local level cooperation may humanize the dispute and build constituencies for peace.

A final border settlement requires time, political will and mutual trust. However, several realistic steps can reduce tensions and gradually build toward resolution.

- **Maintaining the Status Quo with Strengthened Border Management.** This is the most practical near-term solution.

Key components of these are:

- Clarification of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- More efficient hotlines and military communication.
- Joint patrolling norms.
- No patrol or infrastructure expansion near contested points.
- Agreement to avoid aggressive military posturing.

This would reduce the risk of accidental conflict.

- **Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)**

CBMs can decrease hostility without requiring territorial compromise:

Regular military-to-military talks, revival of joint military exercises (hand-in-hand exercises), cultural exchanges between border communities and greater movement of pilgrims to Tawang monastery and Tibetan sites may bring changes in the relationship between the two nations.

- **Enhancing economic diplomacy can also reduce the hostility between both the nations.**

Economic interdependence encourages peace. Reviving bilateral trade groups, expanding border trade points, engaging through BRICS, SCO and G-20 platforms and by developing joint economic projects which benefits both sides can mend the relationship between the two.

- **Multilateral Dialogue Framework**

Trusted third parties (not mediators but facilitators) can create diplomatic space, such as UN peace-building programs ASEAN dialogue, Himalayan river basin cooperation mechanisms, dialogues involving scholars and retired diplomats.

The Tibet Factor—Managing Religious and Cultural Issues

China's sensitivities regarding Tibetan separatism significantly affect its position.

Solutions may/may not include:

- India ensuring that Tibetan refugees refrain from political activities hostile to China.
- China guaranteeing religious autonomy in Tibetan regions.
- Joint preservation of Buddhist cultural heritage across the Himalayas.

Such measures could reduce Beijing's insecurity regarding Tawang's influence in Tibetan politics.

Ensuring Border Community Welfare

A long-term solution must include Indigenous communities, who hold deep cultural ties to the land. Policies should aim to increase local participation in discussions, protect tribal land rights, promote sustainable development and connectivity and avoid militarization of civilian zones. Ultimately, political will and strategic foresight are essential. Recognizing that prolonged rivalry undermines their own development goals, India and China can choose cooperation over confrontation for a shared and stable future.

Findings

The study finds that the Arunachal Pradesh dispute is sustained by a combination of historical grievances, strategic calculations and nationalist narratives. The region's geopolitical importance makes it central to both countries' security concerns, thereby complicating compromise. The dispute has a negative impact on bilateral relations, regional stability and local communities, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and militarization. However, the analysis also reveals that peaceful management and gradual confidence-building are feasible and can significantly reduce tensions. A mutually acceptable solution, whether through final settlement or stable management, requires sustained dialogue, respect for sovereignty and a long-term perspective prioritizing regional peace over short-term strategic gains.

Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh remains one of the most sensitive issues in Indo-China relations due to historical, cultural, political and strategic factors. China's claim based on Tibet's historical influence clashes with India's long-standing sovereignty, democratic integration, and administrative control. The dispute is embedded in nationalist narratives and geopolitical transformations in Asia. A complete resolution in the near future is unlikely, given the political costs for both sides. However, conflict escalation is not inevitable. By strengthening CBMs, clarifying the LAC, enhancing border management, building economic ties, and addressing Tibetan-related concerns, India and China can significantly reduce tensions. A peaceful border is essential for the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. Diplomatic realism, mutual respect and sustained dialogue are the keys to ensuring that the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh does not endanger regional peace or derail the development trajectories of two major Asian civilizations.

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