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3. Guarding The Eastern Himalayas: The Role And Importance Of Arunachal Pradesh In India's Geostrategic Defence Strategy Against China

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Abstract

This article explores the various significance of Arunachal Pradesh in India's security paradigm. Arunachal Pradesh is located in the northeastern part of India. It occupies an important role in shaping India's defence strategy against China due to its strategic geographic location, contested borders and socio-political dynamics. The state shares an approximately 1,129-kilometer border with China to which it continues to claim it as "South Tibet." This unresolved boundary dispute has repeatedly resulted in tensions with China and subsequent skirmishes from time to time. Arunachal Pradesh functions as both a geopolitical buffer zone and a critical military zone enabling India to monitor Chinese activities across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The region's mountainous terrain, hills, river systems and proximity to Tibet enhance its defensive value. This research article examines the historical context, geographical significance and evolving defence measures undertaken by India. It also examines the challenges posed by China's superior border infrastructure and political claims. By situating Arunachal Pradesh within India's broader geopolitical and defense strategy the article argues that how Arunachal Pradesh serves as a linchpin in India's broader strategy of deterrence, regional stability and sovereignty protection.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, border security, defence strategy, geopolitics, military infrastructure.

1. Introduction

India and China are the two major Asian powers and both have shared a long history of cultural exchanges, economic relations and political complexities even before the coming of

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colonial rules. However, their bilateral relationship has been repeatedly strained by unresolved border disputes particularly in the Himalayan frontier. Among the contested areas, Arunachal Pradesh stands out to be as one of the most sensitive as China claims the entire state as part of its territory. For India, Arunachal Pradesh is not only an integral state but also a strategic bulwark that anchors its defence posture in the eastern sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Situated in Northeast India the state shares a 1,129 km border with China where Arunachal Pradesh has become a focal point of security tensions between the two Asian giants. Strategically, the terrain of Arunachal Pradesh presents both opportunities and challenges for India's defence preparedness. The rugged mountains and dense forests provide natural barriers against large scale invasions and at the same time they also create logistical constraints for troop movement and infrastructure development. In contrast, China has invested heavily in modernizing infrastructure across the Tibetan plateau enabling the rapid mobilization of its forces. This development from China's side makes the defence of Arunachal Pradesh a critical concern for Indian security planners. The developments of modern roads, advanced landing grounds, surveillance systems and the forward deployment of specialized mountains divisions has gradually strengthened India's ability to deter aggression. At the same time, Arunachal Pradesh's roles extend beyond its borders, symbolizing the larger strategic competition between India and China in Asia. Thus, studying its importance is not merely a matter of regional security but a window into the evolving dynamics of Asian geo-politics. This research article seeks to understand how Arunachal Pradesh influences India's defence strategy against China. It also investigates the historical roots of the border dispute, the strategic relevance of the state's geography, India's defence preparedness and future challenges in safeguarding its sovereignty.

Objectives

1. To analyze the factors that makes Arunachal Pradesh central to India's defence strategy against China.
2. To examine the role of geography, infrastructure development and military deployment in strengthening India's security posture in the region.

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3. To assess contemporary challenges and future directions in safeguarding Arunachal Pradesh within the broader framework of India-China strategic competition.

Research Questions

1. What are the factors that shaped the strategic importance of Arunachal Pradesh in India's defence policy against China?
2. In what ways do geography, infrastructure and military deployment contribute to India's defensive and deterrent capabilities in Arunachal Pradesh?
3. What contemporary challenges does India face in defending Arunachal Pradesh and what strategic measures can ensure its long-term security against Chinese pressure?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology relying primarily on secondary sources to examine the strategic role of Arunachal Pradesh in India's defence posture against China. Given the geopolitical sensitivity of the region and limited access to primary data due to national security concerns secondary research forms the backbone of the analysis.

Research Design

The research adopts an exploratory and analytical design. It seeks to understand the interplay between historical, geographical, political and military factors that make Arunachal Pradesh a critical component of India's security framework. By integrating descriptive and analytical perspectives, the study highlights both past developments and emerging challenges.

Data Collection

Data was collected from multiple secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, think-tank publications, policy briefs, books and credible media articles. Reports by the Indian Ministry of Defence, research papers from strategic studies institutions and publications on Sino-Indian relations were prioritized to ensure accuracy and reliability.

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Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied. Data was categorized into themes such as historical background, geographical significance, defence infrastructure, military strategy and contemporary challenges. This thematic coding allowed for a structured assessment of India's defence strategy in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethical Considerations

The research relies exclusively on publicly available and ethically sourced materials. Care has been taken to avoid misrepresentation.

1. Historical Context of the Dispute

The India-China border disputes are deep rooted in colonial history. The McMahon Line drawn during the 1914 Simla Convention between British India and Tibet demarcated the boundary in the eastern sector which is an imaginary line. India recognizes the McMahon Line as the legal border but China rejects it arguing that Tibet at that time had no authority to sign such agreements. The dispute became more prominent after the fall out between India and China in the 1950s and India gave asylum to Tibetan Leader Dalai Lama along with his Tibetan followers. India, which had previously enjoyed close cultural and political ties with Tibet started facing a new and assertive neighbour along its Himalayan Frontier that is China. The most significant event in this historical contest was the 1962 Sino-Indian War. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Chinese forces briefly occupied parts of Arunachal Pradesh before unilaterally withdrawing. Although China pulled back, the conflict exposed India's vulnerabilities in border defence and left a lasting imprint on defence strategic thinking. Despite their withdrawal, Beijing has continued to assert its claims frequently referring to Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet". The 1986 Sumdorong Chu standoff, the 2017 Doklam crisis, incursions near Tawang (border areas) from time to time and abandoned bulldozers of China seen near the border areas of Upper Siang District highlight the persistence of this dispute. The historical backdrop thus makes Arunachal Pradesh not just a borderland but also a major flashpoint in India-China relations.

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1.1 Geopolitical and Strategic Significance

Arunachal Pradesh is not merely a border state but it is also a strategic frontier that embodies the intersection of geography, politics, culture and security in India's defence calculus. Its significance lies in multiple dimensions that extend beyond military considerations shaping both national security and regional geopolitics.

i. Buffer Zone in the Himalayas

Arunachal Pradesh serves as a buffer zone between the mainland India and Chinese-controlled Tibet. Its strategic location enables India to maintain a defensive shield against Chinese military advances. With its rugged terrain, high altitude passes and dense forests the state naturally acts as a defensive shield. As the state shares over 1,100 km of international boundary with China's Tibet Autonomous Region it function as a vital buffer zone safeguarding India's northeastern frontiers. China's continuous claim over Arunachal Pradesh highlights its importance not only as a geographical entity but also as security shield. The rugged Himalayan terrain act as a natural barrier restricting the movement of foreign forces into Indian territory. For India, maintaining control over Arunachal Pradesh is crucial in order to prevent any direct Chinese influence from penetrating into the Brahmaputra valley in Assam and further into the Indian heartland. India continues to strengthen its defence infrastructures in the state in order to reinforce the state's buffer role. The state acts as territorial boundary shielding the east. It also acts a military, cultural and political buffer zone against Chinese expansionism. The Himalayas in this sector thus serve as both a natural barrier and a potential battleground which would depend on the level of preparedness on either side.

ii. Religious and Cultural Significance

Tawang is located in western side of Arunachal Pradesh and the region holds deep religious significance due to its association with Tibetan Buddhism. The Tawang Monastery which is one of the largest outside Tibet is not only a spiritual centre but also a geopolitical flashpoint. Tawang was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama and China views it as an important place

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to look for the legitimacy of future Dalai Lama successions. China also fears that India may play a role in the succession process of the next Dalai Lama. Thus, Tawang has become a geopolitical flashpoint for India and China adding religious and cultural dimensions to the strategic competition.

1.2 Proximity to strategic Borders

Arunachal Pradesh's location makes it a critical node in India's northeastern defence network. It borders not only China but also Bhutan and Myanmar creating a complex geopolitical environment. Its proximity to the narrow Siliguri Corridor often referred to as India's "Chicken's Neck", increases its strategic relevance. Any compromise in Arunachal Pradesh could expose vulnerabilities in India's connectivity to its northeastern states making the defence of this frontier an existential priority.

1.3 Wider Geopolitical Implications

Beyond immediate defence concerns, Arunachal Pradesh symbolizes the larger India-China rivalry for influence in Asia as well. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, its Belt and Road Initiative and its growing partnership with Pakistan highlight its broader strategic ambitions. For India, defending Arunachal Pradesh is part of a larger effort to resist Chinese pressure and assert its role as a regional power. In this context, the security of Arunachal Pradesh contributes not only to safeguarding national territory but also in shaping India's geopolitical standing in the Indo- Pacific.

Arunachal Pradesh's geopolitical and strategic importance extends well beyond its boundaries. It is simultaneously a protective shield, a cultural stronghold and an important matter in India's regional strategy. Its defence is not only about territorial integrity but also about sustaining India's influence and stability in an evolving Asian order.

1.4 Gateway to Southeast Asian countries

Arunachal Pradesh strategically located in the northeastern frontier of India holds immense potential to serve as a gateway to Southeast Asian countries if properly developed. Sharing

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borders with Bhutan, China and Myanmar, the state occupies a crucial position in India's Act East Policy which seeks to strengthen economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian nations. However, this potential remains underutilized due to less infrastructural developments, limited connectivity and inadequate industrial growth.

The development of roadways, railways and air connectivity in Arunachal Pradesh can transform it into a major corridor for trade and commerce. Improved highways linking Arunachal Pradesh with Myanmar, Bhutan and beyond could facilitate cross-border trade and people-to-people exchange. Moreover, the construction of modern border trade centres and integrated check-posts would help boost exports of local products such as handicrafts, horticultural goods, medicinal plants, etc. In this regard, the Kaladan Multi- Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway can serve as vital linkages if properly extended to Arunachal Pradesh.

Cultural and historical affinities between the people of Arunachal Pradesh and Southeast Asia nations can also improve and in longer run it may also provide opportunities for tourism, cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges. Eco-tourism and adventure tourism in Arunachal's pristine landscapes could attract visitors from neighboring regions while shared traditions and festivals may further strengthen soft power diplomacy.

Beyond trade and cultural engagement, the development of Arunachal Pradesh can also serve as a strategic defence mechanism against China's growing assertiveness along the border. Strong infrastructure, modern connectivity and active regional integration would not only strengthen India's economic presence but also enhance military preparedness. Well-developed border roads, advanced surveillance and logistical networks can acts as deterrents ensuring that Arunachal Pradesh remains both a bridge to Southeast Asia and a strategic shield for India.

2. Defence Infrastructure Development

Roads and Highways

For many decades, infrastructures in Arunachal Pradesh lagged behind, creating logistical difficulties. However, in recent years, India has accelerated road construction, including the

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Trans-Arunachal Highway and border roads under the Border Roads Organization (BRO). These developments allow faster troop movement and logistics support in times of need.

Airbases and Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs)

India has revitalized several ALGs in Arunachal Pradesh, such as Pasighat, Mechuka, Ziro, etc. These enable rapid airlifting of troops and equipment especially in areas where road connectivity remains a challenging task.

Forward Military Deployment

The Indian Army maintains strong forward deployment in Arunachal Pradesh with specialized mountain warfare units and divisions trained for high-altitude combat. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) also plays a critical role in patrolling and maintaining vigilance.

3. India's Defence Strategy in Arunachal Pradesh

Deterrence through Infrastructure and Deployment

India's core strategy revolves around deterrence and they can be achieved by enhancing connectivity, strengthening military presence and ensuring rapid mobilization.

Diplomacy and Military Balance

While defence measures are central, India also balances its approach through diplomatic engagement with China because outright militarization risks escalation.

Integration with Regional Security

Arunachal Pradesh is no longer an isolated frontier. Its security is intertwined with the northeastern states and the wider Indo-Pacific strategy. Defence cooperation with countries such as the United States, Japan and Australia under the QUAD indirectly bolsters India's stance in the region.

4. Contemporary Challenges

Chinese Infrastructure Superiority

Despite India's efforts, China maintains an edge with its extensive advance road, rail and air network in the border area of Tibet. The rapid mobilization capacity of the People's

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Liberation Army (PLA) remains a significant challenge though India is also trying its best to strengthen its military infrastructures.

Terrain and Weather

The difficult terrain and unpredictable weather make defence logistics arduous. Mountainous terrain favors defensive strategies but also complicates troop deployment in the region.

Political Sensitivities

China regularly protests Indian leaders' visits to Arunachal Pradesh and attempts to rename villages in the region. These political maneuvers complicate bilateral relations and heighten security concerns.

5. Future Directions

i. Strengthening Infrastructure

Continued investment in roads, tunnels and communication systems is essential for bridging the gap with Chinese infrastructures.

ii. Leveraging Technology

India must enhance surveillance using drones, satellites and radar systems to improve situational awareness.

iii. Local Involvement and Civil-Military Integration

The local population serves as the first line of resilience. Integrating indigenous communities through development and civil-military cooperation can enhance security and stability.

iv. Diplomatic Balancing

India must combine military preparedness with diplomacy, working to manage tensions while securing its territorial integrity.

Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh occupies an unparalleled position in India's defence strategy against China, serving simultaneously as a territorial frontier, a cultural stronghold and a geopolitical buffer. The state's history of contestation rooted in colonial boundary making and aggravated by China's persistent claims has transformed it into one of the most sensitive threats to India's national security policy. The legacy of the 1962 war continues to cast a shadow over www.theresearchers.asia

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India's strategic thinking while recurring standoffs particularly in Tawang and other sectors along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) underline the fragile nature of peace in the region. India's defence strategy in Arunachal Pradesh reflects a careful balance between deterrence and development. The construction of roads, bridges, tunnels and advanced landing grounds has significantly improved mobility and logistics enabling rapid deployment of troops. Forward deployment of specialized mountain divisions, backed by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and advanced surveillance systems reinforces India's defensive posture. The integration of local populations into security framework through development programs, infrastructure projects and socio-political inclusion which strengthens both resilience and legitimacy is equally important. Yet, challenges still persist. China's superior border infrastructure, its aggressive posture in renaming places and rejecting Indian sovereignty and the harsh Himalayan terrain, all these complicate India's defence preparedness. The strategic competition between India and China also extends beyond the borderlands into the wider Indo-Pacific region with Arunachal Pradesh symbolizing the larger rivalry between the two powers. In the years ahead, India's ability to safeguard Arunachal Pradesh will depend not only on military readiness but also on diplomatic agility, technological adaptation and sustained investment in border development. Its geographical position, historical context and cultural significance make it a contested yet indispensable frontier. India's evolving strategy marked by infrastructure development, military deployment and diplomatic engagement reflects its determination to safeguard sovereignty and deter aggression. As the India-China rivalry intensifies from time to time the importance of Arunachal Pradesh will deepen more making it a linchpin in India's long-term security calculus. Ultimately, Arunachal Pradesh is more than a frontier and it is the linchpin of India's sovereignty in the eastern Himalayas and a cornerstone of its long-term strategic balance with China.

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