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Commentary

McMahon's Deadlock: Is the Indo-China Dispute Shifting to Arunachal?

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In January 2021, news broke that Chinese troops had built an entire village in Arunachal Pradesh (Som 2021).

Satellite images from November 2020 show 101 homes built 4.5 kilometres into Indian territory (Figure 1).

CATALYST

In September 2019, Tapir Gao, the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] MP of Arunachal Pradesh, cautioned the Lok Sabha that China had moved 60-70 kilometres beyond the McMahon Line, also called the Line of Actual Control [LAC], to construct a bridge within Indian territory. Gao warned that “if another Doklam were to happen anywhere, it would be here— in Arunachal” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2019).

In following months, the suspicion that the Indo-China conflict would shift to Arunachal — proved true. In January 2021, news broke that Chinese troops had built an entire village in Arunachal Pradesh (Som 2021). Satellite images from November 2020 show 101 homes built 4.5 kilometres into Indian territory (Figure 1). Ministry of External

Affairs confirmed they had received similar reports of China undertaking construction along the LAC.

Figure 1: Development of Chinese Village in Disputed Territory



Source: Som 2021

Meanwhile, China contested the allegations by stating that it cannot be accused of trespassing since it never agreed to McMahon Line as the LAC. The Chinese foreign ministry continued this narrative, asserting that “all construction activity had been within China’s territory” (Lo and Zhang 2021), implying Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese property¹. They justified building the village as a part of their poverty alleviation scheme for the Tibetan region, expressing their intent to construct a total of 624 more villages on the disputed border (ibid). The Global Times, the Chinese Communist Party’s mouthpiece, published that the area India claims as Arunachal Pradesh is actually South Tibet, which the Chinese Government never recognised as Indian (Sikun, Yusha, and Siqi 2021) and can, therefore, build in.

This diplomatic friction outlines why many experts caution that the Indo-China dispute may be shifting east, especially to Arunachal Pradesh. The natural question that comes out of this is if most nations today respect their international borders to maintain peace and sovereignty, why can India and China not do the same in Arunachal?

The simple answer is because the two neighbours do not have a mutually accepted and demarcated border. As of now, both nations tip-toe around the LAC status quo (Figure 2), which is disputed too.

¹ Although India claims the area, China built the village in the region under its occupation since 1959.

Figure 2: Indo-China LAC



HISTORY OF THE McMAHON LINE

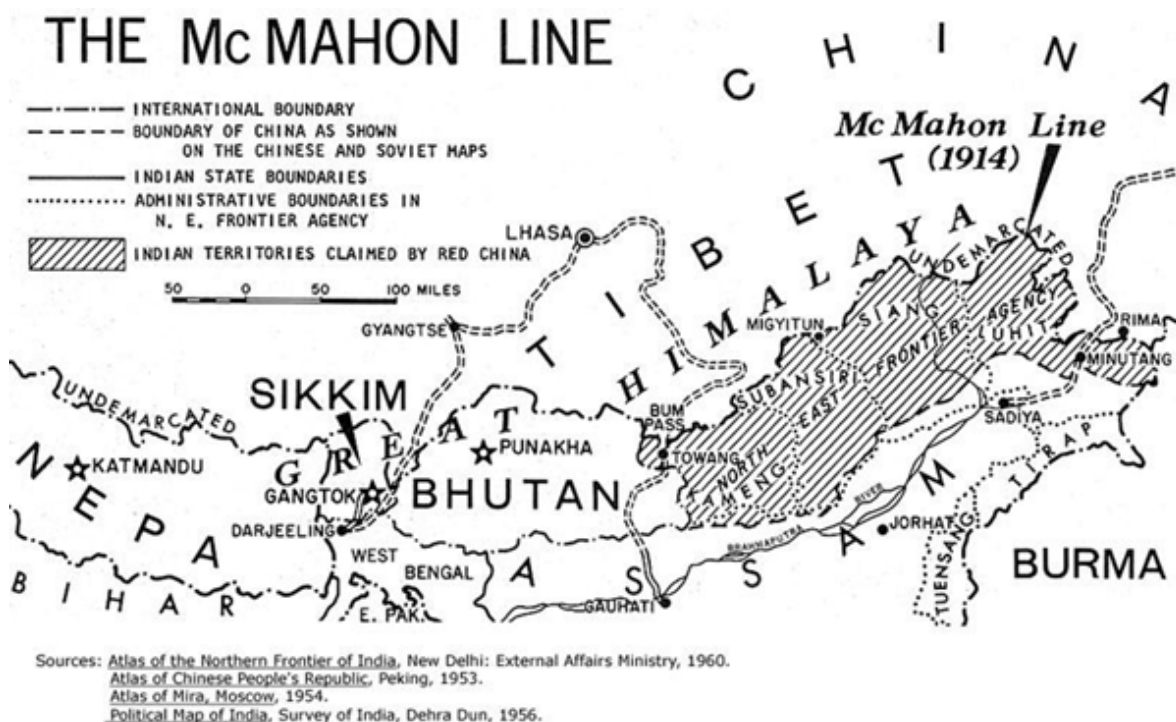
The longer, more nuanced answer lies in the history behind the creation of the McMahon Line.

Colonial powers were in the habit of using ‘water parting’ to determine international borders. Water parting was the colonial practice of dividing land based on its natural topography that separated waters flowing to different water bodies (Gardner 2019), regardless of the inhabiting communities and the socio-political situation on the ground.

Currently, three colonial-era boundaries constitute the disputed Indian border with China. These are the 1865 Ardagh-Johnson line encompassing Aksai Chin into Ladakh, the 1893 Macartney-Macdonald line running along the Karakoram range following the Indus River watershed, and the 1913 McMahon line forming the current-day Arunachal Pradesh border with the eastern Himalaya’s watershed.

Such colonial watershed boundaries are a significant reason behind the undecided Indo-China border. Specifically, in North-East India, the McMahon line induced a political deadlock. McMahon line is the most disputed Indo-China boundary (Figure 3), with India claiming it as its official eastern border while China vehemently denies the proposition, naming the region South Tibet.

Figure 3: The McMahon Line



Source: Phanjoubam (2015)

Drawn by British negotiator Henry McMahon in 1913, the line was a consequence of the Shimla Conference between British, Tibetan, and Chinese envoys. Following China's disagreement with the proposed margins, McMahon signed the agreement with Tibet privately and kept it a secret from the Chinese delegation. This gross misstep violated the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907² and the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1906³ (Sen 2014). The boundary was contentious, but the matter remained unsettled until independence.

As independent India began mapping its political frontiers, the two neighbours attempted to settle their border. However, they found themselves in disagreement over the colonial status quo that defined it. The Chinese argued that they were under no obligation to observe the McMahon line as it was illegal in international law, and they never agreed to it in the first place.

Meanwhile, India pointed out that decolonisation did not put a nation's borders up for debate; Arunachal had been under Indian administration since the 20th century and would continue to remain. Furthermore, the McMahon line runs between Tibet and India, both of whom agreed on the boundary, even keeping Tawang open for mutual cooperation (Phanjoubam 2015). The situation only changed when China annexed Tibet in 1950. The Chinese occupation of Tibet does not grant China Arunachal under the guise of it being South Tibet, especially since they are not supposed to be in Tibet in the first place.

This diplomatic, and sometimes military, back and forth brings the world's two most populous nations, rapidly industrialising and rich in nationalist rhetoric, into an

² The convention stated that neither Russia nor the UK could negotiate with Tibet except through the Chinese Government as the intermediary (Sen 2014).

³ The convention bound the British government 'not to annex Tibetan territory' (ibid).

uncomfortable deadlock. With 885 kilometres of contested border, the possibility of the dispute moving east is inevitable.

INDICATIONS THAT THE INDO-CHINA CONFLICT MAY SHIFT TO ARUNACHAL PRADESH

A sharp increase in infrastructure, Arunachal's inherent ecological abundance, and the role of the Buddhist demographic nudge the state towards the centre of the Indo-China conflict.

In May 2020, China warned India that since it was trying to "unilaterally change the status quo of border territory" by undertaking construction near the Leh border, China would take "necessary counter-measures" (Singh 2020). The statement establishes that industrialisation and infrastructure development along the border served as flashpoints in the latest standoffs.

For instance, in 2017, the Doklam dispute catalysed over the Chinese attempting to build a road within Bhutan's Doklam region. Indian troops reached the scene to assist their Bhutanese allies, resulting in the standoff. India, mindful that Doklam ridge is only 80 kilometres from Siliguri Corridor, had to protect its vital passage to the north-eastern states (Joseph 2018). Similarly, the 2020 Galwan Valley clash occurred over India constructing a road bridge in the valley that connected the important Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road to Durbuk in Ladakh. Although the bridge lies firmly within the Indian territory, it is only 7 kilometres from the LAC, which provoked the Chinese.

Such clashes are only likely to increase as both nations ramp up their infrastructure along the McMahon Line. Between March 2018 and 2020, Border Roads Organisation [BRO] had built 1,505 kilometres of roads, with the bulk of them being in Jammu and Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh (Agrawal 2020). Within COVID-19 lockdown, BRO has constructed the Daporijo bridge over river Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh that strategically connects India to LAC. Ministry of Defence (2020) laid out future aspirations along the Arunachal LAC in reporting that the bridge was upgraded to allow heavier vehicles to pass, "catering for not only Army requirements but the future Infrastructure development requirements of Upper Subansiri district."

Further adding to the possibility of the conflict stirring in Arunachal is its inherent value as a land and people. While Aksai Chin is an uninhabited high-altitude desert where, infamously, not a blade of grass grows, Arunachal is resource-rich and culturally diverse. The state holds 20% of India's total fauna, is one of the designated 12 mega diversity "Hot Spots" globally, and is the richest biogeographical province in the eastern Himalayan zone (Department of Forests and Environment n.d.).

What stands central to the Sino-Indian conflict is the region's water abundance. Brahmaputra, Siang, Subansiri, Kameng, Lohit, Tirap, Dibang, Drangme Chhu, Papumpare, and others grant the province an estimated 9339 kilometres of rivers and streams (Department of Fisheries n.d.). These tributaries braiding through Arunachal can "form potential lifelines for these two energy-starved, water-scarce giants, leading to an intense competition for the exploitation of natural resources through dam-building" (Guyot-Réchar and Gardner 2021). A timely example of this is China's recent greenlighting of the Brahmaputra dam construction in the Tibet

Autonomous Region. This dam is set to be the world's largest hydroelectric facility, three-fold more powerful compared to the world's current largest Three Gorges Dam, also in China. Keerthana (2021) cautions that though the dam will create 300 billion Kilowatt-hour of clean energy annually for China, it will negatively impact India's agriculture in downstream areas, upset Brahmaputra's flow into the North-Eastern states, and endanger the sensitive local ecosystems.

In addition to the region's significance as a land, Arunachal Pradesh's demographic also plays a significant role in the trilateral issue of India, Tibet, and China. A sound 11.77% of Arunachalis identify as Buddhists and share their border with Buddhist countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, and occupied Tibet. Furthermore, the town of Tawang houses "the biggest Tibetan Buddhist monastery outside Chinese-held Tibet and is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama" (Guyot-Réchar and Gardner 2021). Therefore, those who administer the Tibetan Buddhist Himalayas also control the Indo-China dispute over Tibet.

With the 14th Dalai Lama well into his 80s, it's integral to Tibet's survival to find his successor. According to Tibetan tradition, the successor will not only replace the current Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism but also as the political leader of the Tibetan people. The 15th Dalai Lama would embody the Tibetan cause, which would be a menace to China's aspirations in the region. The current Dalai Lama told Terry (2004), "The purpose of reincarnation is to fulfil the previous [incarnation's] life task. My life is outside Tibet, therefore my reincarnation will logically be found outside." With the stated possibility of the next Dalai Lama found outside Tibet, presumably India, "controlling the Tibetan Buddhist Himalayas, notably Tawang, could potentially determine where the next Dalai Lama will be found" (Guyot-Réchar and Gardner 2021).

BORDER SKIRMISHES: A NECESSARY EVIL?

The border dispute has no end in sight. For China, it is a matter of retaining Tibetan land that it considers its own. For India, it is a matter of defending the state of Arunachal that it has governed for the last century. Both giants must proceed with caution because any misstep may result in loss of lives on both sides of the border, as seen in last year's Galwan clash. Guyot-Réchar and Gardner (2021) posit that the only way to assert sovereignty over the land is by integrating it into one's periphery through either development or heavy military presence. As both neighbours clamber to do the same, it will inevitably result in frequent disagreements in the short term.

Some argue that the rising frequency of clashes is a marker of progress. Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested that the better the infrastructure at LAC, the higher the likelihood of confrontation due to increased patrolling. This line of thought proposes that increased standoffs can be attributed to the Indian Army's increased ability to "monitor, detect and respond to Chinese PLA patrolling" (Dhasmana 2020). Similarly, Kyle Gardner (personal communication, 13 May 2021) also speculated that while border infrastructure may increase tensions in the short term, gradually, it will pave a semi-precise facto borderline that may settle some of the overlapping territorial claims.

Until the future reveals itself, the question of whose land it is to develop will dangle as both nations rapidly build their respective outposts. And thus, India and China find themselves in a deadlock on a border neither of them was in the room to agree on, ultimately both must attempt to observe.

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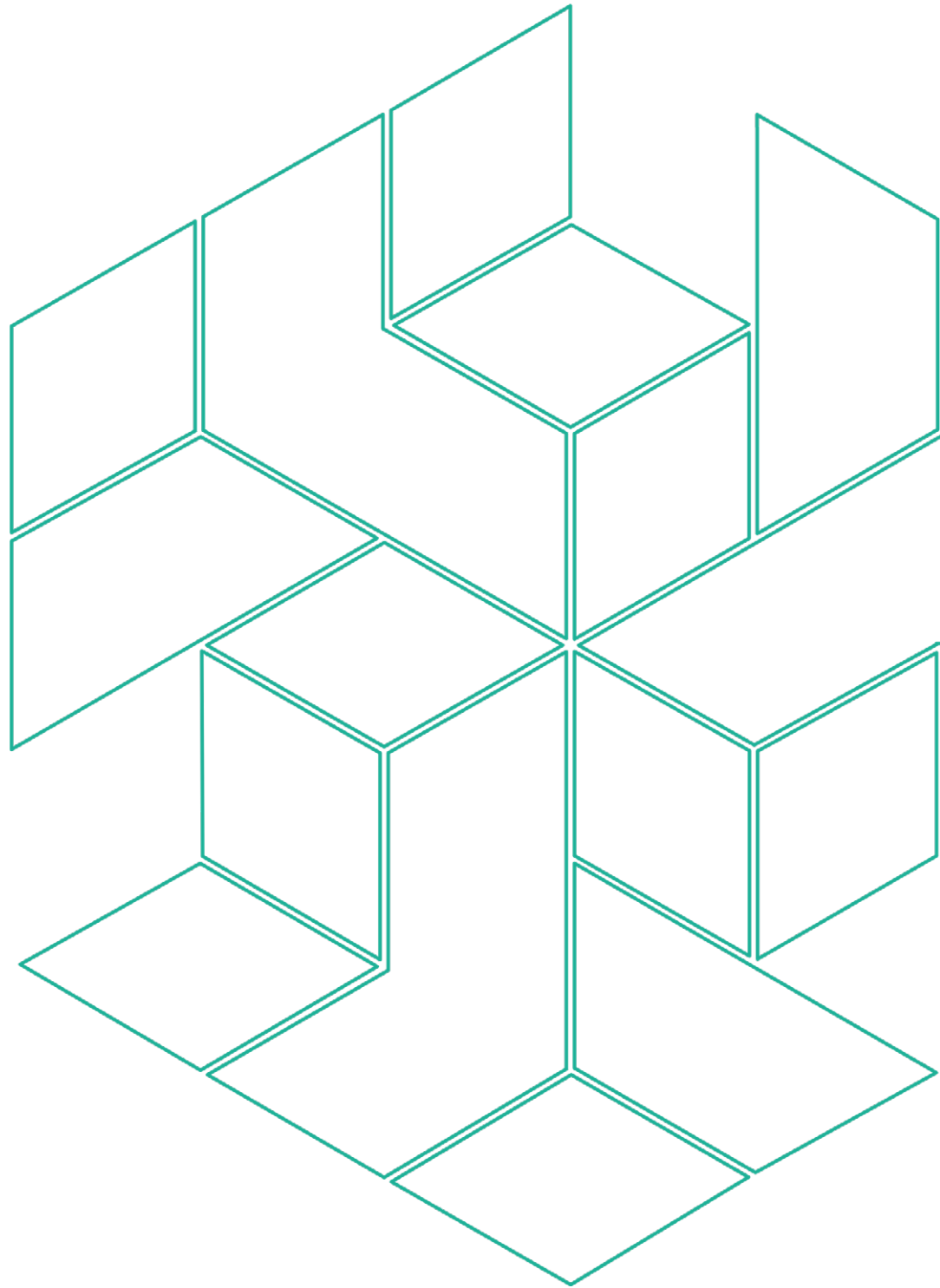
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