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Keshab Chandra Ratha
Assistant Professor, School of
Political Science, G.M.
University, Sambalpur,
Odisha, India

Tawang's turbulent legacy: Navigating historical lessons for future challenges

Keshab Chandra Ratha

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Abstract

Tensions between India and China have escalated significantly following recent clashes near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Yangtse region of the Tawang sector in Arunachal Pradesh. Tawang holds significant importance for China as it provides a major access point into northern India. From the Chinese viewpoint, it emerges as a pivotal site in the narrative of Tibetan resistance against Chinese dominance. Tawang may emerge as a crucial hub of resistance if Tibet insurrections against China. Tawang Monastery, situated in Arunachal Pradesh, holds considerable religious and cultural significance for Tibetan Buddhism from an Indian perspective. India asserts historical dominion over Tawang via the McMahon Line, delineated in the 1914 Simla Accord, however China disputes this assertion. India asserts that China would get a significant strategic edge if it successfully occupies Arunachal. The necessity to finalise and enhance many projects has intensified due to the persistent strife in the Eastern Himalayan region and the rise of a nationalistic government. Beijing perceives India's recent enhancement of its road and logistical infrastructure along the LAC, especially in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, as a growing threat. China's recent advancements in Tibet and Xinjiang, such as the construction of new airports and heliports, provide considerable prospects for military augmentation and aerial surveillance, instigating apprehension in India. This article explores the contentious border disputes between China and India, suggesting innovative strategies like soft borders and community engagement for effective border management.

Keywords: Tawang, legacy, geopolitics, historical lessons, future challenges

Introduction

Historical Baggage

Tawang, a 10,000-foot-high region in western Assam Himalaya, is divided into three main zones. The northern zone features the Tawang proper, a 17th-century Tibetan monastery, while the second zone, spanning 13,940 feet, includes the administrative center of Dirangdzong. The Tawang region, located in the Tengs tributary of the Kameng, is separated from Bichom by the Bombdi La, forming the third zone. The region is home to Rupa and Shergaon villages, and is inhabited by Mönpas, who are Tibetanized in language and culture. The region was part of the Tibetan district of Tsöna, and was governed by the Trukdri council, including the Dzongpöns of Tsöna and the Abbot of Tawang^[1].

In the 17th century, Chinese imperial expansionism took over Tawang, a colony of Tibet for over 250 years. The ethnic Monpas and Sherdukpens were found to be significantly different from Tibetans and more closely resembled the residents of Bhutan and Sikkim. Captain GA Nevill warned the authorities in 1914 that Tawang was ideal for a secret Chinese invasion into India. British officers attempted to rescue the Monpas and Sherdukpens from the Lobas (Tanis) of Akas and Mijis who were conducting frequent extortion raids. The largest landowner, the Tibetan-run Tawang monastery, imposed its own tax on Monpa farmers, manors, serfs, herdsmen, and pastures. The Tantric cult once held a significant presence in Tawang's political and religious history. The Sela Pass region, inhabited by Padmasambhava's Nyingmapa and Karmapa and Kagyu religious traditions, was a significant center established by Bengali monk Naropa in the tenth century. The first shrines in Tawang were built by the third Karmapa in the late 12th century. After the fall of the Qing Empire, British India attempted to reclaim Tawang through negotiations with the Chinese and Tibetans, which resulted in the Simla Convention being ratified in 1914. China refused to ratify an accord that raised ambiguity for Tibetans on the McMahon Line, claiming it was

Corresponding Author:
Keshab Chandra Ratha
Assistant Professor, School of
Political Science, G.M.
University, Sambalpur,
Odisha, India

contingent on Peking's approval. India did not seize possession of Tawang until 1938 due to various factors, including the Tibetan volte-face, McMahon's departure from India, the financial crisis, and the outbreak of World Wars [2].

The 1914 Simla Convention established the McMahon Line as the border between Tibet and British India. The 1962 Sino-Indian conflict began in Tawang, where India, China, and Bhutan meet. The conflict led to India's perception of China as a security threat, causing an arms race and increased defence spending. India developed capabilities to confront China, including aircraft carriers, ballistic missiles, and nuclear weapons. This perception intensified the rivalry between India and China, with public discourse linking disputed territory takeovers to the 1962 war [3].

What is India's Perspective?

India's closest territory to China, Arunachal Pradesh, could be a missile launch site, and its air defences would be most effective if stationed there. China's long-term goal is to control the Tawang outpost to monitor the situation in the LAC and Tibet. Arunachal Pradesh's strategic location, natural resources, cultural variety, and biodiversity make it crucial to India's neighbourhood strategy. China claims Arunachal Pradesh, giving India a strategic advantage. India has expanded infrastructure in the region, aiming to thwart China's expansionist plans. The Tawang region, with significant indigenous communities and military engagements, is the epicenter of the 1962 conflict. It remains a subject of debate and holds significant value for the New Delhi government in resolving boundary issues [4]. Tawang, a region in Arunachal Pradesh, is home to the Tawang Monastery and holds significant religious and cultural importance for Tibetan Buddhism. India claims historical control over Tawang, citing the McMahon Line established during the Simla Accord of 1914. China opposes the McMahon Line, and India controls Arunachal Pradesh. The Tawang dispute is influenced by regional geopolitical dynamics, with the strategic interests of neighbouring countries like Bhutan and Myanmar potentially playing a role in resolving the conflict. India advocates for peaceful resolution through bilateral negotiations, while China enhances military and infrastructure development along the border.

What is China's Viewpoint?

Tawang, located in Cona County, is considered an integral part of China due to its historical significance as the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama and the Dalai Lama's refuge in India after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. Beijing is seeking to consolidate its power in Tibet by annexing Buddhist holy sites like Tawang. Dongzhang, a vital frontline area in defence of South Tibet, is also a concern due to India's improved logistics and transportation along the LAC. The Sela bi-lane tunnel in Xishankou Pass is seen as a threat by Beijing. China is claiming Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang, and plans to build roads between Bhutan and China. The Chinese claim is substantiated by two separate bases. Tawang, a region in Arunachal, was historically under Tibetan influence, characterised by a prominent monastery and the collection of taxes by Tibet. Tibet lacked the authority to endorse the 1914 Simla Agreement, which delineates a border between Arunachal and Tibet along the Himalayan watershed, and

the conference represented a British endeavour to separate Tibet from China [5]. China's extensive dam network could use water as a geostrategic weapon against India, controlling water levels and creating flooding or drought. The Tsangpo river, originally from Tibet, ends in India as the Brahmaputra. China fears the Dalai Lama may appoint a successor outside of Tibet, potentially in Tawang, due to its association with Tibetan Buddhism and the large number of Tibetan refugees in India. China's rule in Tibet depends on maintaining control over Tawang, as controlling the next Dalai Lama is crucial for sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism. India's growing logistics and transportation capabilities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, are perceived as a threat by Beijing. The Xishankou Pass and Sela bi-lane tunnel, built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), pose a threat to newly constructed border communities in the Dongzhang region.

Countering Chinese Claims

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh disagree with China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh, arguing that the region's historical ties to Tibet are debatable. They believe that China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh is a distortion of history, as Tibet maintains distinct political sovereignty. The Adis, Nishis, and Apatani tribes also disagree, stating that barter commerce and migration to Tibet are unrelated to politics or administration. They view China's approach as a geopolitical ambition, and their strong ties to India make supporting India's stance essential for protecting their cultural and political rights. Arunachal Pradesh residents fear a "Kargil-type" operation, due to China's potential military intrusion into disputed territories. The Dalai Lama's presence in Tawang and the region's strategic location along the India-China border heighten geopolitical tensions. A "Kargil-type" operation could involve covert military action, leading to a larger confrontation. Tawang's strategic importance as a military and cultural hub adds to the risk of tensions, as China's desire to control the entire region and assert dominance in the Himalayan belt [6].

The Existing Landscape

The Sino-Indian border talks have been stalled due to increasing aggression and violent attempts on both sides to impose their own interpretations of the Line of Control (LAC). The lack of a demarcation along the LAC has led to China asserting new claims and building up their military and infrastructure until they are met with resistance. This strategy has strengthened President Xi Jinping's reputation and increased his chances of securing a third term. In India, political disputes may arise due to the rapidly expanding economy, leading to increased troop deployments and financial costs. The Tawang Monastery, a cultural centre, is also under scrutiny. China's concerns about India's infrastructure development may be a factor in its disruptive actions along the border, aligning with its strategic objectives. The strategic and cultural importance of Tawang is rising as the time for the nomination of the new Dalai Lama draws near. The goal for India is to prevent further Chinese attempts to redraw the LAC and to leave the border unresolved until the political cost of doing nothing is greater than resolving it for China. China pressured India to support its control over Aksai Chin in exchange for India's control over Arunachal. After 1962, China downplayed its interest in Arunachal, focusing on strengthening its control over

Aksai Chin. Since the 2000s, China has contested Southern Tibet, giving Chinese names to 15 locations in Arunachal, strengthening military might, and opposing Indian infrastructure upgrades^[7].

India has spent Rs 15,477 crore on road construction in areas bordering China since 2014, including 2,088 km of roads. China's bases near the LAC have also been improved, with dual-use airports, fortified shelters, and longer runways. India is also constructing infrastructure in eastern Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on improved living conditions, soldiers' facilities, and faster personnel and material movement. The Sela tunnel project in Arunachal Pradesh, a key component of India's infrastructure drive, is set to be completed by April 2023, aiming to expedite the delivery of soldiers and weaponry to Tawang^[8].

The Chinese Road connecting Xinjiang and Tibet through Aksai Chin is near completion in western LAC. Beijing's intrusion into Arunachal Pradesh is driven by an imperialist mindset, with young Tibetans being used in front regions to ensure local support in case of war. India views their relationship as bilateral, while China views it through the global system, leading to a disparity in value assessments. Xi Jinping's third term as president could cause tensions in the Sino-Indian relationship^[9].

The Gaps That Persist: A Deeper Look

The Sino-Indian border conflict is a complex issue involving nationalism and federal authority. Both nations are using it to showcase their military and economic prowess, with Chinese media promoting cutting-edge technologies like exoskeletons and armed robots. This conflict has given India a platform to demonstrate its resistance to China's invasion, despite their lack of tactical usefulness. Both India and China have had modest success in handling border conflicts and resolving trust issues. Despite frequent meetings and high-level engagements, the trust gap between the two nations has grown. The rapid strengthening of border infrastructure and military capabilities raises security threats, exacerbated by anxieties and road-building initiatives. The peace along the LAC depends on the political prowess of both governments amidst increasing military capabilities and strong mistrust. The Tawang border conflict remains unresolved despite 18th and 22nd rounds of border talks and Special Representatives Dialogues. Despite sectoral approaches, the two nations have not progressed beyond delegation meetings. Despite rising Chinese and Indian leaders, domestic political considerations limit their ability to resolve disputes.¹⁰ Tawang's political and religious fusion could potentially spark conflict, threatening peaceful border development and the Dalai Lama search. Despite this, a war between China and India is unlikely due to its challenging geography. Indian strategy has been revised to strengthen deterrent defence, with increased military deployments in response to Chinese pressure to alter the status quo^[11].

What Needs to Be Addressed

Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, located on different sides of the undefined northern border, requires a proactive approach to penetrate Chinese sensitive areas. India should adopt a border defence law and extend BIMA's programs to the LAC. Concessional land should be given to security forces and families originating from the area, allowing them to

settle in villages. This would strengthen inclusive growth, integration, and deter Chinese settlements along the LAC. India should continue strategic alliances with like-minded countries and pursue early initiatives to create an independent supply chain, trade, and technology eco-system^[12]. The Tawang conflict has subsided, but India must prepare for potential invasions. China's recent provocations in Arunachal Pradesh may be used to gauge India's response to potential intrusions. India should be concerned that China may use its border advantages to show its dominance in Asia. The Chinese Communist Party's recent showing of a 2020 conflict film demonstrates China's efforts to maintain the border dispute with India^[13]. India's "guns vs. butter" issue can be resolved by resuming economic growth, reducing government spending, eliminating vote-buying subsidies, and selling idle assets. Understanding China's goals and focusing on its military is crucial. Reducing the trade deficit and changing foreign policy, soliciting global opinion, and reviewing the Sino-Indian Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement are also necessary.¹⁴ A National Intelligence Reserve Corps, similar to the US, should be established for emergency support and requires skilled professionals from commercial, academia, and civil society sectors. A strategic technology group could be created to create disruptive technologies, reform existing ones, and synchronize them across various stakeholders^[15].

India should focus on developing "digital sovereignty" and offensive cyber warfare capabilities to deter potential threats. This can be achieved through the construction of quantum communication satellites and systems for armed services, ensuring secure communication channels. The ongoing border conflict between India and China could be resolved through improved diplomatic ties, demilitarization of military forces, and the development of economic and industrial trade windows. China has proposed an East-West Swap to resolve the India-China boundary issue, retaining territories in the west while India retains everything in the east. Both countries must focus on improving relations to avoid escalating tensions^[16]. The boundary conflict between China and India is causing strain on bilateral ties. China's water diversion from the Brahmaputra River, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and expanding influence in South Asia are causing frustration for Indian policymakers. Beijing is also dissatisfied with India's growing ties to Southeast Asian nations and military-diplomatic interactions with the US, Japan, and Australia. The concept of Wuhan Spirit aligns with the five ideals of peaceful coexistence, and both nations agreed to strengthen trade and commercial partnerships. They also agreed to promote a rules-based multilateral economic system and open trade agreements. Moscow has a significant stake in the trilateral partnership, proposing a tripartite coalition with Russia, China, and India to expand its influence beyond its economic capabilities^[17]. India faces a complex security environment due to threats from Pakistan and China, with militarization increasing and China's Belt and Road Initiative a concern. To counter China, India needs to strengthen its military posture and collaborate with Southeast Asian countries. The India-China border dispute is crucial for political and economic stability, and creative solutions like creating "soft borders" and involving local populations in border control can promote peace.¹⁸ Open communication, information exchange, and border-verification procedures can build strategic confidence. Addressing public perception through civilian

dialogues is also essential. Resolving the border dispute requires India to reconsider its China policy and understand historical, cultural, and geopolitical complexities.

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