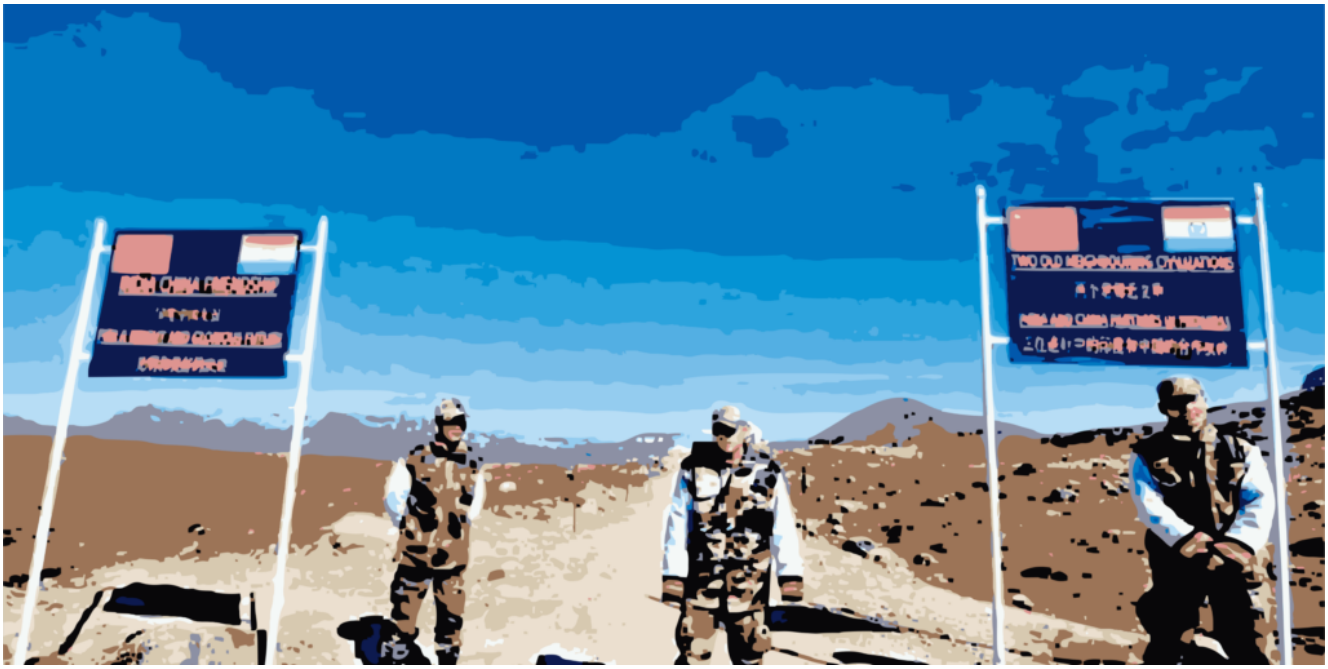
Arunachal Pradesh: The Military and Political Challenges on India's Eastern Frontier

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On October 22, Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) Director General Shatrujeet Singh Kapoor's acknowledgedcontinuing face-offs between Indian and Chinese troops at several locations in Arunachal Pradesh. This has brought renewed attention to an increasingly sensitive section of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) given that it came from a serving senior security official. The video of the interaction was subsequently taken down after extracts circulated widely in the media.

The developments follow reports of Chinese activity around Taksing in Upper Subansiri district. In June, the Nah Welfare Society (NWS), representing local border communities, alleged that the PLA had established camps and expanded infrastructure in areas traditionally accessed by villagers. It claimed that some areas used for grazing and

collecting forest produce had come under Chinese control. The Indian Army rejected the allegations as baseless, while the state government said it would examine them. Subsequently, in late July, Indian and Chinese patrols reportedly encountered each other near Maja, around 2.5 kilometers inside India's claim line. Following the customary exchange of banners, the Chinese patrol initially withdrew but returned in early August and established temporary positions. Indian personnel subsequently deployed opposite them. Similar tensions were reported around neighboring Longju. On 6 September, the two sides held Corps Commander-level talks at the Wacha-Damai border meeting point, followed by another meeting on the Chinese side the next day. These were significant developments because such high level military interactions had not previously been institutionalized in the eastern sector in the same manner as in eastern Ladakh.

A parallel controversy started in South Siang Valley. Opposition to the proposed 11,200 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) has intensified among indigenous communities, particularly the Adi population. The government is presenting the project as a strategic necessity in response to China's proposed 60,000 MW hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet. However, residents fear that the Indian project could submerge ancestral settlements, disrupt agricultural livelihoods and damage culturally significant sites. The protests have increasingly spilled onto social media, where sections of mainland India's nationalist discourse have portrayed opponents as anti-national, sympathetic to China or opposed to national development.

China's new push towards Arunachal

The significance of the latest border developments lies in China's ability to gradually alter the operational situation without necessarily triggering a major military confrontation. Since the LAC remains un-demarcated in several sectors, Beijing has repeatedly exploited this ambiguity through

infrastructure development, sustained patrol activity and the establishment of border villages. The bigger concern is terrain and access. Arunachal is dense forest, with narrow valleys and limited road connectivity. India's main logistical link to Taksing is the Tame Chung Chung-Taksing Road, which the BRO completed in May 2018 after nine years of work. Further Chinese infrastructure could help the PLA sustain a forward presence and constrain Indian access to contested patrolling points, making it harder to reverse. There are growing signs that China has embarked on a new trajectory towards Arunachal since at least 2023. Beijing has issued "standardised" Chinese names for places in the state every year since then (11 in 2023, 30 in 2024, 27 in 2025 and a sixth batch in April 2026), having done so only twice before. The Indian side, however, still treats recent transgressions as local incidents or differences in perception.

Chinese transgressions in the Eastern Sector are not new, and historically they have been frequent in three places – the Namkha Chu and Sumdorong Chu valleys, and Longju. The current standoff is new in kind, but not in place. Face-offs at Asaphila date back to at least 2003, and it was acknowledged in the 1993 border agreement. A PLA tented presence 6-7 km inside India's perception, held through a leaders' summit and Corps Commander talks, would mark a change from transgression to possession.

There is also a diplomatic cost to the way these developments are communicated. Since the 2020 clashes, the government's transparency on border issues has been inadequate. India has reasons to avoid publicly discussing every patrol encounter, particularly when negotiations are underway. However, excessive ambiguity can also work against Indian interests. A gap between its public discourse and developments on the ground may embolden China and reduce India's own ability to establish a consistent public account of its concerns.

The Siang connection

The controversy over the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) brings another dimension to India's eastern frontier challenge. The project was first proposed in 1982–83 and declared a national project in 2008, revived in 2020 following China's plans for a massive hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, which flows into India as the Siang. Thus, from New Delhi's perspective, SUMP is a strategic response to China's potential ability to influence river flows. But as a storage project, it can only partly buffer flows, not counter them. In practice, invoking China has hardened local opposition, and Chinese commentary is using the protests to question India's standing in the state. Moreover, this project has encountered opposition from the indigenous Adi community rather than building consensus, leading to serious local protests. Local skeptics question the government's motives and the dam itself. Katon Moyong, an engineer and SIFF youth representative, says the Adi have rejected a dam on the Siang for 47 years and accuses the government of pushing the project for gain ahead of the 2029 Assembly elections. Furthermore, the government's attempt to push ahead with preliminary surveys, backed by significant security deployments, has deepened distrust. This has manifested in *bandh* (shutdowns called by local groups) and subsequent arrests, internet restrictions, and action against journalists and social media accounts.

This security-first approach was also visible in the Great Nicobar Island project, a transshipment port, dual-use military-civil airport, power plant and township justified on strategic grounds. In both cases, invoking national security has narrowed the room for consent and scrutiny rather than building local support.

Key trends to watch

In the near term, if the PLA keeps its tented positions through the snow season, the deployment will look more like a permanent positional claim, as happened in eastern Ladakh

after 2020. A second indicator is clarity on where those positions sit relative to China's own claim line. India and China each have their own perceptions of where the border runs, and in some places those perceptions overlap. If the tents are in that overlapping area, China is pressing a claim it has made before. If they are beyond the line China itself claims, China is making a new claim. Either way, if China stays put, Asaphila would become a fourth area in the Eastern Sector where China holds land India considers its own, after Namkha Chu, Sumdorong Chu and Longju. Precedents also point a likely pattern. In 2014, the Chumar intrusion and the 2020 Ladakh intrusions ended through "no patrol" zones, largely on land India claims, rather than restoration of the earlier position.

In the Siang Valley, the government needs to address concerns over displacement, environmental consequences, customary land rights, and the absence of adequate information about the project's impact. The growing hostility on social media and equating opposition to SUMP with support for China is particularly counterproductive. Local communities in Taksing first raised the alarm over PLA activity in June. The people of Arunachal have protested against both Chinese incursions and the dam. If the China threat is invoked to justify the dam while it is played down on the border, residents may see it as an excuse rather than a reason.

The stakes go beyond one project. Arunachal has long been the only state in the region to adopt Hindi as its lingua franca, and the only state without a notable separatist insurgency. Some civil society groups now perceive that Delhi has treated this loyalty as a licence to proceed without consent. SIFF's spokesperson has said the valley's people should not be treated as outsiders, and young people in Upper Siang say they have never seen this level of militarisation in their villages. The government is bypassing the same civil society which has historically acted as a safety valve for dissent and

mediation. The Arunachal Indigenous Tribes Forum has formed a committee to facilitate dialogue, and the Arunachal Christian Forum has offered to mediate between the government and SIFF.

The two stories meet as it could not have come at a worse time, as China pursues multi-vector grey-zone expansion along the border through patrols, infrastructure, the renaming of places in Arunachal and a mega-dam upstream. The growing distrust between local communities and Itanagar and New Delhi is being pushed into uncharted territory. Ultimately, the challenge in Arunachal is to ensure that India retains the ability to defend its territorial claims, sustain a military presence, and maintain the confidence of its border population.