



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

China-India Border Issues and Northeast India: A View from India

The most recent flare-up of border and territorial tensions between India and China has reignited discussion on this longstanding issue between the two countries. In a timely and topical presentation, Dr. Namrata Goswami, a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) spoke about the driving factors behind this issue at “[China-India Border Issues and Northeast India: A View from India](#),” held by the Rising Powers Initiative on May 8, 2013. Dr. Goswami used powerpoint slides during her presentation which contained several detailed maps. The PowerPoint can be found [here](#). In addition, an audio recording of the event is available [here](#).

Introducing the Region of Conflict

Dr. Goswami began by introducing the region around the disputed India-China border and some of the inherent difficulties involved. Arunachal Pradesh, in the northeast area of India, is territory that is disputed by the two countries. The area around this state is extremely diverse, with many different ethnic groups and identities. It is an extremely strategic area for India, in part because of the many armed ethnic conflicts that have threatened regional security for generations. Most of these armed conflicts have cross-border connections with

ethnic conflicts in other countries, such as the conflict involving the ethnic Karen and Kachin in Burma. In addition, most of these conflicts are based on the political ideology of secession, or wanting a state outside of India based on ethnic identity.

Significant Factors Affecting the Border Conflict

Several factors were cited by Dr. Goswami when explaining the ongoing border and territorial dispute between India and China. For one, there is the border itself. The McMahon line, which India regards as the official border, was the result of a legal treaty between colonial India under British rule and Tibet. It is also based on a particular cartographic understanding of the region and as such, the Indians believe that this line should be the final settlement of the border. In addition, India argues that China has already used the McMahon line

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as the basis for a border with Burma, therefore creating the perception of a double-standard on China's part. China, however, views the McMahon line as a colonially imposed boundary since India was under British rule at the time. The Chinese wish to resolve the dispute based on the "traditional line" which falls further south of the McMahon line. In addition, regarding Arunachal Pradesh, the Chinese claim that from a historical perspective, Tibet has held administrative control over the territory, and Tibet is part of China. There are also strategic reasons that factor into concerns over the location of the border. From the Indian perspective,

if you lose the McMahon line as the border, then you lose the ability to defend the mountains around it.

The Tibet Factor

Perhaps one of the most significant factors that have fueled the border and territorial dispute is Tibet. All of the border areas of Arunachal Pradesh are deeply connected to Tibetan Buddhism in one way or another. For example, the second most important Buddhist monastery resides in Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh and it is widely believed that the next Dalai Lama may come from this area.

Furthermore, there are major complications involved with having the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile reside in India. As a result, the “Free Tibet” movement is quite strong in the border areas such as Tawang. Dr. Goswami observes that this contributes to an aggressive and defensive negotiating posture on the part of China, which only complicates any resolution of the border and territorial dispute.

Dr. Goswami also points out that when China first conceptualized the “liberation” of Tibet, this received strong opposition in much of the Indian media and general public, leading China to conclude that India was simply trying to undermine China’s drive to unify its territory. There has been a wide-held belief in China that India, particularly under Nehru, has had an expansionist agenda and wishes

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to turn Tibet into an Indian province. Dr. Goswami disagrees. She explains her position by citing the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959 to India and his desire to send a Tibetan delegation to the United Nations to lobby for Tibetan independence. Nehru would not allow this. In addition, Nehru refused the offer of the CIA in 1954 to assist wresting Tibet from Chinese control. Nehru stated that while he did wish for Tibetan autonomy, he did not favor intervention of any kind.

What have been the Results of These Factors?

Dr. Goswami points to recent developments on both sides of the border to illustrate the changing security dynamic. For one, there has been an increase in military installations on the border and upgrading of airfields by India. China has constructed missile sites near Tibet with missiles that can reach Delhi, and they are planning to deploy even longer range missiles in the future. Military exercises have also escalated on both sides, particularly in Northeast India, where little to no such exercises occurred in the past.

Ultimately, Dr. Goswami draws on factors such as Tibet, military exercises, the warming of the U.S.-India relationship, local

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perceptions and the complexity of negotiations when explaining the long-standing and recently increased India-China tensions. Each side's recognition of the other as a nuclear state will almost certainly avoid an escalation to all-out war. At the same time, it remains to be seen if the border and territorial issue will result in small-scale conflict or increased deterioration in diplomatic relations in the future.

By Michael Bouffard, Program Coordinator, Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

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