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Topic of Research: India-China Relations: North-East India as a Factor

Findings

The thesis, titled '*India–China Relations: North-East India as a Factor*' explores the multifaceted relationship between India and China through the lens of North-East India, a region that lies at the crossroads of security, development, and diplomacy. Guided by four core objectives and three hypotheses, the study investigates how this strategically vital frontier shapes India's responses to China's expanding regional ambitions, and how local socio-political realities reinforce India's national posture.

The first objective of the study, which is to analyse the different facets of India–China relations both competitive and co-operative, finds that the bilateral relationship is characterised by competitive coexistence and cautious cooperation. It reflects a state of armed peace: engagement overshadowed by mistrust and cooperation constrained by rivalry. Despite expanding economic interaction, deep strategic suspicion persists due to unresolved boundary disputes, rivalry across South Asia, and China's assertive infrastructural activities along the Himalayan frontier. Diplomatic mechanisms such as the Special Representatives' talks on boundary issues and collaboration in forums like BRICS, the SCO and the G20 indicate efforts towards stabilisation. However, repeated incidents of border incursions and episodes of cartographic aggression continue to expose the fragility of mutual trust. This dual pattern confirms the first objective. India and China operate within a stable yet tense framework of co-operative competition in which dialogue and deterrence function simultaneously.

Addressing the second objective, the study highlights North-East India in India's foreign policy as a geopolitical hinge and a critical frontier linking India's security imperatives with its regional economic ambitions. The region's historical experience of the 1962 war and China's persistent claims over Arunachal Pradesh make it indispensable in India's defensive calculus. Policies such as the Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First Policy have redefined North-East India from a security frontier into a gateway for regional engagement. Infrastructure projects like the Sela Tunnel, Trans-Arunachal Highway, Frontier Highway, Bogibeel Bridge, Dhola-Sadiya Bridge and Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) in Pasighat, Tezu and Yingkiang illustrate this shift, combining mobility with deterrence. India's developmental efforts here carry deep strategic intent aimed at countering Chinese influence.

The third objective and the first hypothesis together confirm that China's sensitivity regarding territorial issues in North-East India changes in different contexts and issues. During periods of relative stability, Beijing tends to downplay its claims and instead emphasises trade or confidence-building measures. However, when geopolitical tensions rise, its rhetoric becomes markedly sharper. China's sensitivity is evident in issues such as its objections to the visits of Indian leaders and the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh, which it uses to highlight its stance. India, however, asserts that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of the country, and its leaders frequently visit the state. In the domain of hydro-politics, China's construction of dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo introduces strategic uncertainties for India and underscores the asymmetry in upriver–downriver relations. These patterns demonstrate China's issue-specific pragmatism and adaptability, thereby substantiating the first hypothesis that its territorial assertiveness fluctuates in response to the broader geopolitical environment. The context also includes India's bid for a

permanent seat in the UN Security Council, while China has consistently opposed India's admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the UN Security Council. Additionally, India's engagements with the Quad, its lobbying for the designation of state-sponsored terrorism, and its criticism of China for violating Indian sovereignty through the OBOR project further influence China's fluctuating posture.

Supporting the second hypothesis, the study reveals that Chinese aggressive behaviour and territorial ambitions, together with India's development policy initiatives, have strengthened pro-Indian sentiments among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Beijing's renaming of places and its issuance of stapled visas have been met with local resistance and a stronger assertion of Indian identity. India's welfare schemes and developmental projects, notably the Vibrant Villages Programme and the Border Area Development Programme, have deepened integration and strengthened national belonging. The Arunachal Frontier Highway, the Sela Tunnel and other major developmental projects are emblematic of these efforts, reinforcing India's sovereignty and public support. Hence, Chinese provocations have unintentionally consolidated India's hold over the region. The study also highlights China's pursuit of "Three Warfare" tactics – legal, psychological and informational – to strengthen its territorial narrative. Instances such as the inclusion of Ziro Valley and the Apatani tribe in Chinese publications, and the repeated renaming of places in Arunachal Pradesh, form part of this strategy to legitimise its cartographic aggression. However, these measures have largely failed. Indigenous communities such as the Adi, Nishi, Galo and Apatani have categorically rejected any association with China, reaffirming their deep-rooted cultural and political ties with India. The renaming of the Tsangyang Gyatso Peak by India symbolises a proactive counter-narrative to Beijing's psychological warfare. Thus, pro-Indian sentiment in Arunachal Pradesh is not merely a passive allegiance but an active expression of faith in India's democratic and developmental vision.

The fourth objective and the third hypothesis collectively establish that improvements in communication and transport in North-East India have strengthened India's leverage vis-à-vis China in terms of deterrence, defence and development. Infrastructure developments such as the Arunachal Frontier Highway, the Trans-Arunachal Highway, the Bogibeel Bridge and the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge have improved military logistics, enhanced civilian mobility and supported regional growth. Government-approved projects including the NH-115 and NH-717A upgrades, with a combined outlay exceeding ₹820 crore, further reinforce connectivity in border regions across Assam, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. These investments not only promote economic modernisation but also bolster India's deterrence capability and defence preparedness along the Line of Actual Control.

The study situates these findings within the evolving balance of power in South Asia, where China's growing influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives challenges India's strategic environment. The vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor remains a concern, as Chinese involvement in Bangladesh and Bhutan raises fears of strategic encirclement. In response, India has intensified defence deployments and expanded infrastructure in the corridor while strengthening maritime security through Project Varsha and Project Seabird. The Act East Policy further enhances India's outreach through the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project, and Asian Highway Network, positioning North-East India as the bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Together, these initiatives strengthen deterrence through both defence and development.

The study concludes that India's approach to its North-East frontier represents a calibrated synthesis of security and development. While the border remains contested, strategic investments in infrastructure, governance and diplomacy have yielded tangible geopolitical dividends. North-East India, once perceived as a periphery, has emerged as the fulcrum of India's strategic engagement with China, where geography, development and diplomacy converge in shaping modern Indian foreign policy.