

## **Dragon in the Misty Land, Chinese Influence in the North-Eastern Region: A Critical Analysis**

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*“China’s role in the North-eastern India is not to create instability but ‘to maintain instability’ because it wants to keep India out of Myanmar.”*

—— Bertil Lintner<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This article is an abridged version of the paper titled “Dragon in the Misty Land, Chinese Influence in the North-Eastern Region: A Critical Analysis” by the author. The article outlines that the initial Chinese support to the insurgent movements in the Northeast (NE) of India followed the classic communist doctrine of supporting revolutionaries. It draws upon the Chinese psyche built up over generations through their cultural background including the game of ‘Wei Qi’ which imparts in their strategic thinking a ‘Grey Zone’ quality. The author brings out that the NE Region requires a cogent approach in all spheres, especially in infrastructure development and opening up the region for industry. The fault lines based on ethnic divergence and porosity of the borders and developmental deficit make it a challenging task for the administrators and security establishment to usher in peace as these vulnerabilities can be exploited by grey zone actions.*

### **Introduction**

**A**t its inception, Chinese support to the insurgent movements in the Northeast (NE) of India followed the classic communist

doctrine of supporting revolutionaries. Unlike in other parts of the world, these revolutionaries were not communists at heart. The main group in Nagaland, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) while being revolutionary in character was hardly communist as their main slogan was the non-atheist 'Nagaland for Christ'. Most groups were organised into quasi-military units with uniforms, ranks and organisations. These were both over ground and underground. Over a period of time as strategic dynamics changed, the Indian state managed to resolve some insurgencies and reduce others. With growing integration of the NE, the insurgencies have lost the revolutionary fervour. Today, the insurgent groups in the NE have lost the basic agenda for their movements and have become extortionist profit making bodies with focus on an industry called narco and arms trafficking.

### **Enter the Dragon**

A popular Chinese game called Wei Qi<sup>2</sup> or Go is an abstract strategy board game, for two players, in which the aim is to surround more territory than the opponent. As per popular belief, it teaches the art of hiding intentions which should never be disclosed. The Chinese play the game of Wei Qi in their dealings with neighbours and its foreign policy in general.

**Wei Qi.** The game involves the art of deceiving the adversary, hiding intention and looking for solutions in the areas not addressed. This seems to be the Dragon's approach conforming to the Chinese master strategist, Sun Tzu who said, "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." China has used this strategy with great success. It has used its military power not for war but for successful military and diplomatic coercion. It seems the Chinese leadership plays this game rather well by hiding the intentions. Its forays in Doklam and now in Eastern Ladakh seem to be a long-term strategy aiming to strike at place of their choosing. Having redrawn the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in several Ladakh sectors, China is now seeking to replace the term LAC with the looser expression 'border areas'. It had its way in the Moscow 'agreement' of Feb 2021 on the side lines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting, which repeatedly mentions "border areas," not LAC.<sup>3</sup> All the boundary-related bilateral accords and protocols are LAC-centred.

But it appears that China is treating the LAC as a line to actually control by changing facts on the ground. The Moscow agreement's use of the vague term "border areas" helps obscure China's encroachments and creates space for more Chinese salami-slicing<sup>4</sup>.

**The One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).** OBOR and BRI are gambits in a fresh game of Wei Qi. It is a strategy for hegemony on land and sea, in particular in the Indian Ocean. According to the sources, the BRI involves over 70 countries and is bigger than US Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after WW II. The Indian Ocean has major traffic going through its waters namely the container traffic and the oil shipments. With the BRI coming in, China can become the dominant power in the Indian Ocean with the wherewithal to influence this traffic. China has established links in Myanmar. The recent coup there will expedite the growth in Chinese influence there as Western business stays away. Resultantly, China is now better placed in expanding its influence over the region through Myanmar. The maritime BRI link passes through South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. To facilitate this, China has developed porting facilities up to Djibouti through Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan. These ports, if required, can be used to station naval war ships. These overtures will have major bearing on the delicate and sensitive NE Region.

As stated earlier, Sun Tzu's dictum of subduing without fighting is being pursued single mindedly by China. It has used its military and economic power not for war but for successful military and diplomatic coercion. Its overflowing coffers enable it to apply the dictum with greater effectiveness without overtly making its aggressive intentions clear. This is the grey zone which China is using. China's unchecked military intrusions and transgressions across the disputed border are examples of its military coercion. China, to establish its hegemony in the region, has made aggressive diplomatic manoeuvres with Myanmar and Nepal with an aim to undermine India's standing with these countries. These countries straddling the NE Region are very important in the internal dynamics and balancing of equations. China has been making inroads near the Indo Nepal bordering Lapcha – Limi area,

as reportedly People's Liberation Army (PLA) has constructed buildings in Humla district in Karnali province which is important for the pilgrimage to mount Kailash, a bargaining chip with both India and Nepal. Along with making roads, China has been diverting the course of some of the mountain rivers flowing into Nepal.<sup>5</sup> While earlier China was engaging India only through the NE, now it is also engaging India through Nepal.

**Water as Weapon.** The use of water as a weapon is a clear grey zone move. In the absence of legal water sharing agreements, the adverse effect of reducing lower riparian water cannot be effectively countered. The large-scale construction of dams and river connectivity projects by China pose a serious challenge to water security, not only to NE but South Asia as well. Challenges due to the use of water as a strategic weapon by China in the absence of any worthwhile treaty loom over South Asia. The measures adopted by China to use the water resource of Tibet as its sovereign property are a cause of serious strategic and security concern. Post-Doklam standoff, China had refused to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra, (Yarlung Zangbo in Tibet), while it shared the information with Bangladesh. China's media reported on 30 Nov 2020 that authorities have given the go-ahead for a Chinese hydropower company to construct the first downstream dam on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo in Tibet, marking a new phase in China's hydropower exploitation of the river with potential ramifications for India.<sup>6</sup> The rivers in China give them an advantage in South Asia to use water as bargaining chip for any strategic or economic coercion. With such storage of water, China will have some capability to release extra water when India does not need it and stop the same when it faces water shortage. Water pollution is another concern. It is, therefore, necessary that a water treaty must become a crucial subject of discussion with China bilaterally.

### **Grey Zone Operations**

It is not clear what China's intentions are behind its BRI. Is it a well-laid and finely orchestrated plan to extend Chinese hegemony over much of the developing world? This is what its critics claim. Or, as the Chinese assert, is it simply an attempt to replace America's worldwide domination with a multipolar order

where there is a more efficient allocation of resources and integration of markets which everyone would benefit from?<sup>7</sup> So, the equation is the fulcrum called the NE states between China and India. Holding or engaging India elsewhere will keep Indian attention and energy from stabilising the NE. It will prevent India from its efforts to use the region as the launch pad to reach out to Southeast Asian Region through Myanmar. Veteran journalist-writer Bertil Lintner had said, China's role in the North-eastern India is not to create instability but "to maintain instability" because it wants to keep India out of Myanmar. China uses military coercion, intrusions and transgression at various points on the disputed Mc Mahon Line<sup>8</sup> / Ardagh-Johnson line<sup>9</sup>.

### **End Game**

The NE is a region which holds promise for the Chinese to use grey zone operations against India. It can keep India distracted while it establishes a presence at Kyaukpyu in the manner it has done at Gwadar. Once done, India's East and West coasts will face a vulnerability that they have not faced since the Europeans came to our shores in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Our NE, which is geographically located at crossroads and is a fulcrum to India's forays into Southeast Asian Region, will stand bypassed and diminished. Stability and development of this launch pad is essential for the policy of Look East / Act East to succeed. There is a need to address the region holistically and look for an inclusive approach to all the issues. The Look East and now Act East have a lot of promise to find an inclusive solution to the region but it requires stability which is elusive at least at the moment till the insurgent groups come into peace agreements with the government. Chinese grey zone strategy will aim to ensure that such stability is always interfered with. The security dimension needs to be addressed holistically and strategically. India needs to be sensitive to the possibility of the Chinese using this gambit and stymying it by allocation of attention, resources, and development to long delayed initiatives in the NE. The accessibility to, and within, the NE through the road and surface communications requires urgent attention. The weak industrial base and economic zone not supported by developing infrastructure makes it difficult to make it self-sustaining.

**Proactive Engagement.** The NE Region requires a cogent approach in all spheres, especially in infrastructure development and opening up the region for home grown industries under 'Vocal for Local'. The region is rich in raw materials and an attractive target for the anti-national elements. The fault lines based on ethnic divergence and porosity of the borders and developmental deficit make it a challenging task for the administrators and security establishment to usher in peace. All-inclusive approach addressing all the spheres like development, aspirations of the people, addressing the issues raised by the insurgent groups within the framework of the Indian Constitution is the need of the hour.

The region has abundance of the minerals, gas, oil, and hydro power which is waiting to be harnessed and once done, it will not only change the face of the region to prosperity but address all the aspirations of the people. This development will also give India the power to extend its gains to Myanmar and Bangladesh e.g., Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur once completed will not only power the region but it will be surplus for the neighbours. The region is surrounded by Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal, which would have direct adverse economic bearing in case Chinese actions destabilise it. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that in our strategy to enhance the Look East / Act East venture, Myanmar and Bangladesh must be taken on board. The entry to Indian Ocean is through Bay of Bengal and India, Myanmar and Bangladesh are the littoral states in the bay. The shortest route from China to the bay is from Kunming / Chengdu Region. Chinese state-owned firms have reached agreements with Myanmar to construct a \$ 7.3 billion deep-water port and \$ 2.7 billion industrial area in a special economic zone at Kyaukpyu along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. The strategic town is the terminus of a \$ 1.5 billion oil pipeline and parallel natural gas pipeline running to Kunming in China's Yunnan Province.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Chinese unconventional operations can have traction in the NE Region because of the enabling factors there. Some of these factors are vestiges of history and some a result of lack of effective governmental control by states due to the tribal nature of society and traditional tribal laws. The Kyaukpyu project helps Chinese to avoid the vulnerable Malacca strait. China needs pliable countries to further the aim of BRI by connecting the surface BRI to maritime BRI and dominating the world's busiest and crucial sea lines of communication, the Indian Ocean and Malacca strait. Indian stability in the region would effectively check China in the NE Region. Any stability will benefit from our positive engagements with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Only then we will be effective in Acting East for the security and prosperity of all smaller countries in the region and pre-empt any grey zone actions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bert Lintner, *The Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, (Noida, India: Harper Collins 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Wei Qi (Mandarin for 'board game of surrounding') had its origins in China sometime before 500 BC. Wei Qi, probably better known as 'Go!' is a game which occupies a place in Chinese history and culture. The basic aim of the game is to capture as large a territory as possible on the board.

<sup>3</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "On China, India is making a mistake" *Opinion, Hindustan Times* Sep 18, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/on-china-india-is-making-a-mistake/story-QPxd0o3RJKhgZghOm7mX1l.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Shishir Gupta, "China road projects changed course of rivers, expanded its territory: Nepal govt document", *Hindustan Times*, Jun 24, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-road-projects-changed-course-of-rivers-expanded-its-territory-nepal-govt-document/story-NGEiAQc25H1olcCXEgu4GI.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ananth Krishan, "China hydropower company plans first downstream dam on Brahmaputra", *The Hindu*, Nov 29, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-hydropower-company-plans-first-downstream-dam-on-brahmaputra/article33206687.ece>

<sup>7</sup> Bertil Lintner, *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean*, (London:Hurst and Company, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The McMahon Line is the demarcation line between Tibet and the North-east region of India proposed by British colonial administrator Sir Henry McMahon at the 1914 Simla Convention signed between British and Tibetan representatives.[1] It is currently the generally recognized boundary between China and India, although its legal status is disputed by the Chinese government.

<sup>9</sup> The Ardagh–Johnson Line is a proposed boundary of Kashmir abutting Chinese Turkestan and Tibet. It was formally proposed to the British Indian government by Major General John Ardagh, chief of military intelligence in London, in 1897, based on the surveys conducted by William Johnson in 1865. The Ardagh–Johnson Line is one of three boundary lines considered by the British Indian government, the other two being the Macartney–MacDonald Line and a line along the Karakoram range. The British preference among the three choices varied over time based on the perception of their strategic interests in India.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory. B. Poling, "Kyaukpyu: Connecting China to the Indian Ocean", *CSIS Briefs*, April, 2018.

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