



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

HIMALAYAS AND ITS STRATEGIC CHALLENGES TO INDIA

Fidel Rahmati

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of Geography
Osmania University
Hyderabad, Telangana-500007

Abstract

Himalayas act as a natural barrier for most of the South Asian countries as the climatic conditions and topography of the buffer countries (India, China: Tibet, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan) are dependent on it. Geologically, Himalayas were formed by the collision of Indo-Australian tectonic plates. The region gives a strategic value to the Indian Sub-continent which always has taken into account as a geopolitical pivot of India along with the Indian Ocean. At the same time, there are significant challenges within the Himalayan region which are very crucial and strategic for India. These issues are mostly geopolitical in nature such as border disputes with China, Pakistan, and Nepal. This study focuses on the major strategic challenges of India in the Himalayan region. For analyzing this paper, we mostly relied on secondary data which were collected through different books, journals, authentic internet sources, grey literature, and websites. The paper highlights on how to minimize the strategic challenges which India is facing presently. This research will be useful for scholars and academicians, foreign policy, decision-makers, security, and strategic influence on frontiers.

Key Words: Himalayas, Geopolitics, Strategic, Buffer-State, Frontiers.

INTRODUCTION

The Himalayas have always played a strategic role throughout history. Preventing any external influences on British colonies and ensuring economic interests via promoting trade routes and links were the major strategic roles of the Himalayas in the region during British rule.

Due to numerous domestic challenges of India after 1947 and two major strategic changes that occurred in the region namely, India's partition and Chinese military intervention of Tibet made it almost impossible for India to secure the British heritage. As a result, the first scenario created an immediate new neighbor- Pakistan and the second, caused the absence of India in Tibet¹.

¹ Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region (Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions), 2019.

India and China make 1/3rd of global population having the potential of the world great powers in the near future. Both countries mostly depend on the Himalaya's trans-border resources for their industrial, agricultural and urban growths. Such exploitation from these resources will be led to a geo-political, social and economic tension in the region².

STUDY AREA

The Himalaya Mountains which are located in Asia separate the Plains of the Indian subcontinent from Tibetan Plateau. The highest peak of the Himalayas is called the "Mount Everest" which is located in Tibet and Nepal. Most world's largest and famous rivers emanate from the Himalayan region namely, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus, Yamuna, etc. The Himalayan regions played as a hub to connect the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush on the northwest, to the north separated from Tibetan Plateau and to the South; the arc of the Himalaya by the Indo-Gangetic plain.



Figure 1, Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/647603621394492062/2020>.

The Himalayas are spread across five countries: Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Afghanistan and Bangladesh could be called as part of the greater Hindu Kush Himalayan river system.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to look at the Himalayas and its strategic challenges to India.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In writing this paper, secondary data has been used from different sources such as; books, published journals, newspapers, government policies, authentic internet sources, and websites. For analysis of this paper, efforts have been made to take in to account the overall objective of the research.

²Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region (Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions), 2019.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature review studied exhaustively, here briefly the most significant and related literatures are listed below:

Bansal. A, and Ketkar. A, (2019), in the introduction of their edited book on “*Geopolitics of Himalayan Region- cultural, political and strategic dimensions*”, stated that even before Westphalian nation-state system, Himalayas have been an integral part of Indian Geopolitics. Hence, strategic and national security discourse without taking in to account the centrality and significant of Himalayan geopolitics will not meet the ground reality and will fail³.

SD, Muni (2019)⁴, in his paper, “*India and the unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context*”, he has concentrated on the most important challenges posed by geostrategic of Himalaya, such as melting glaciers due to climate change, persisting socio-political turmoil and rising China. He has proposed some of the steps that should be taken by India to counter these challenges. He has also mentioned that using India’s soft power to tale China’s hard power is a good option provided that, keeping in mind India’s strength and Chinese vulnerabilities.

Bansa, A (2019) in his paper, “*Gilgit-Baltistan and Aksai Chin: Indian Territories under Foreign Occupation*”, he covers territories of Jammu and Kashmir, which are under the occupation of China and Pakistan⁵.

Rahmati, F. et.al (2020), has written a paper on “*Strategic Location of Siliguri Corridor and Its Issues*”. The paper focuses on the significance of the Himalayas. It acts as a natural barrier in the physiography of India and critical location of Siliguri Corridor which connects northeastern states with the rest of India⁶. Therefore, it shows the strategic significant location for India and at the same time, the Siliguri corridor is very vulnerable due to being as frontiers with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. China has always wanted to infiltrate in the neighboring countries to increase the regional dominance and security over the region.

Rahmati, F; et.al. (2020), states in his paper titled “*A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications*”, that the current standoff between India and China on June 15th, 2020 in Galwan Valley has a deep root in geopolitical issues⁷. It is also conceived that during this pandemic China wanted to take advantage to influence in the region with its own understanding but the current scenario that most of the democratic countries of the world stand with Indian point of view and bale the China for origin of COVID-19 pandemic⁸.

To sum up all the significant points from the above literatures, the strategic challenges of Himalayas have been studied deeply and still, there are hidden dimensions to explore. Therefore, we are trying to investigate the hidden scope of the study area in this research.

³Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, *Geopolitics of Himalayan Region; Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions*, Pentagon Press LLP, 2019, Pp10-11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶Rahmati, Fidel, Mohd Akhter Ali, and M. Kamraju. "A Study on Strategic Location of Siliguri Corridor and Its Issues." *International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods (IJARESM)*, ISSN: 2455-6211, 2020.

⁷Rahmati, Fidel, Mohd Akhter Ali, and M. Kamraju. "A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM)* (2020).

⁸ Ibid.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

Boundary issues, Pakistan administered Kashmir and Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan are the strategic areas in the Himalayan region where China's assertion is most significant to India⁹.

Since the beginning of current century, Asian geopolitics has been revealed by China's rise and the Himalayan region is not exceptional. The drivers behind China's movement in the region has geopolitical as well as strategic reasons which can include the following significant points:

1. To monitor and secure its vulnerability in the Tibet and Xinjiang state of China, therefore, it resonates China's present in the South Asian states;
2. China economic development more relies on foreign markets to export its products and sells its manufacturing in order to sustain its own economic growth. Hence, South Asian neighboring countries are good and close option with 1.891 billion population and approximately 6 % annual average growth rate;
3. South Asia can be a region where China can cope with USA if it wants to ensure its primacy in Asia¹⁰;
4. Climate change and physiographic challenges such as water, geostrategic locations, security, flood, landslide, earthquakes etc., can be another reason for China's presence in the Himalayan region.

Border dispute between India-China

Since 1947, India and China have had an ongoing territorial dispute over 125,000 Km² which encompasses three sectors such as Western sector (Aksai Chin or makes eastern part of greater Kashmir). The second sector is eastern sector which includes state of Arunachal Pradesh of India covering 90000 Sq.Km which occupied during 1962 war by China but later on, in a unilateral ceasefire China withdrew from international boundary McMahon Line in Arunachal Pradesh. But now a days, China claims over entire state of Arunachal Pradesh of India¹¹.

The third sector is the central one which includes Sikkim area in which China is accepting the sovereignty of India over it and other several smaller piece of land across the Line of Actual Control (LAC)¹².

Aksai Chin covers 38000 square Kilometers and is the second-largest shared border between India-China. It is barren land with a high altitude of 5000 meters above the sea level almost uninhabited area, playing a high strategic value to China as it connects Tibet to the Xinjiang province of China¹³.

During 1950, the Republic of China was built 1200 Km² highway to link Xinjiang province with Tibet, in which 179 Km² passed through the Aksai Chin which is claimed by India right now. This highway construction provoked 1962's India-China war and since then, the territory has been a disputed area.

⁹Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region; Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions (Chapter-2, S.D.Muni, India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context), Pentagon Press LLP, 2019, Pp 11-21.

¹⁰Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region; Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions (Chapter2, S.D.Muni, India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context), Pentagon Press LLP, 2019, Pp11-21.

¹¹ <https://www.clearias.com/india-china-border-disputes/>

¹² Zhang, Hongzhou, and Mingjiang Li. "Sino-Indian border disputes." ISPI Anal 181 (2013): 1-9.

¹³ Ibid.

Apart from boundary issues between both the countries, security issues in the Xinjiang province has doubled China's concern. It has been inferred that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative is in line with that. The project operated in 2017 and passed through Pakistan administered Kashmir to secure the turbulent Xinjiang province.

China has always been complaining about Pakistan's radical Islamist forces which have been active in Xinjiang province. China and Pakistan have a common interest and both have a hostile relation with India. Kashmir is one of the issues among the three countries, but China always support Pakistan due to four reasons:

- Due to Aksai Chin which is under control of China but historically was not part of any of the territories either by China or India. It was an independent territory till 1948;
- After the 1962 conflict between India – China, Pakistan gave the trans-Himalaya Shaksgam Valley (strategic location) to China;
- Connecting northern territories of Gilgit –Baltistan to Xinjiang and the Indus Valley and the Gwadar port through China – Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative;
- China continuously supports Pakistan against India in terms of diplomatic and vetoing in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and military Pakistan's nuclear ambitions¹⁴.

India and China faced a series of border conflicts and a full-fledged war in 1962. But they could not resolve the issues of the un-demarcated border which is called 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC). In addition to that, the history of India-China relations lacked 'trust' and reliability¹⁵.

It can be proved by the recent military attack of June 15th, 2020 in Galwan Valley which led to the bilateral and trilateral negotiations without any resolution¹⁶. China does not have any willpower to define the Line of Actual Control through exchange and acceptance of maps.

Keeping in mind, resolving geopolitical issues take much more time than a diplomatic one. Therefore, India and China have locked in a zero-sum game which cannot be resolved without a dramatic changes in the status-que of the region¹⁷. Both the powers manifest dissatisfaction with the current status-que and have followed strategies to maximize their share of regional power.

¹⁴Arshad, China's interventions in the Indian subcontinent: Challenges for Modi's foreign policy, SADF, 2018.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Rahmati, Fidel, et.al. "A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications." International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM) (2020).

¹⁷Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region; Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions (Chapter-2, S.D.Muni, India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context), Pentagon Press LLP, 2019, Pp 11-21.

Infiltration of China in Smaller states of Himalayan region

Both India and China are not only the two regional powers in the South Asian region, but also they play a significant role in the global stage. Their regional and trans-regional behavior impact the foreign policies of the Himalayan smaller states of Nepal and Bhutan.

From 1975 onward, the China-Nepal relations grew significantly, which later on, Nepal, the same as Pakistan became part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China offered a package of \$ 8.5 billion in which Lhasa will be linked to Kathmandu through highways to ensure and smooth exchange of goods and people movement¹⁸.

China has been increasingly active in Nepal's political sphere through its generous support and aid such as building roads, providing transit to third country, printing its currency, exercising joint military operations, making Nepal as a good follower of Communist ambitions led to the alienations of Nepal from India.

Similar to that, China has been trying to manipulate Bhutan in favor of its national interests; yet, it has not seemed to be achieved its goal. As far as China's perception is concerned, Doklam is a disputed territory between Bhutan and China. Doklam is located at the tri-junction among India, Bhutan and China which is close to India's "Siliguri Corridor", connecting seven north eastern states of the Indian mainland. Bhutan contains a very strategic position at the foreign policy of India due to its geographic location to India. Bhutan and India have a good relation which does not seem to be in favor of China.

China is building roads and bridges near by the tri-junction which have been mentioned above. It will give a greater access to China over India's strategically vulnerable Siliguri Corridor¹⁹.

This has really arisen the concern of India regarding China's initiative in the region and it has made India conduct similar activities such as building roads and bridges in its strategic areas along the border land.

There are two important reasons behind China's encroachment in Doklam; one, to reach India's sensitive Siliguri Corridor; two, to play a game with Bhutan in order to retain the Doklam area. Even, China has offered some concessions to Bhutan in its north-eastern sector to secure a bilateral diplomatic relations and resolve the border disputes with Bhutan. If China overcome in resolving the dispute with Bhutan, it will invite Bhutan to join Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to offer enormous infrastructure projects and developing assistance²⁰.

Not only with Bhutan and India, but China also has conflicts and claims with other territories like: "Japan (the two island conflicts in South China sea; Senkako and Ryukyu), South Korea (whole territorial claim-Yuan dynasty), North Korea and Laos (whole territorial claim-Yuan dynasty), Brunei (conflict with Islands), Indonesia, Russia (1.6 lacs Sq.Km), Tajikistan (historical claim quin dynasty), Hong Kong, Vietnam (historical claim-Ming dynasty), India (Aksai Chin, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh), Nepal (Part of Tibet), Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan (South China Sea conflict), Cambodia (historical claim Ming dynasty) and Bhutan (Chinese claim on Dyngmar, Sanmar and Gerso places)". [*Rahmati. Fidel, 2020.*]

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/border-face-off-why-china-tries-to-break-chickens-neck-to-isolate-northeast/articleshow/59420472.cms?from=mdr>, Retrieved-2020.

²⁰Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region; Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions (Chapter-2, S.D.Muni, India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context), Pentagon Press LLP, 2019, Pp 11-21.

CONCLUSION

As stated above, the Himalayan region is an integral part of India which contains a strategic position in the foreign policy of the country. Since Modi's government in 2014, there has been a real shift in the foreign policy of the country in favor of supporting socio-political cohesiveness in the Himalayan region.

As far as ground reality is concerned, China still wants to influence in the region and follow the forward policy to expand its political and military presence in the South Asian region.

The recent standoff on 15th June, 2020 in Galwan Valley between India and China shows that conflict and competition between both the countries seem to be inevitable. Indeed, India has been precisely conscious of the Chinese assertion in South Asia and the Himalayas, but whatever has been done till now from the Indian side was not sufficient in comparison to the Chinese initiative and offers to the smaller states of Himalayan region.

As far as a realistic view is concerned, there is no world government to prevent China's aggression toward any country as well as India. Increasing military power can really help India to deal with China without being intimidated.

It is very vital for India to decrease its vulnerability in the Siliguri Corridor and in the Himalayan region through strengthening its infrastructure, military presence and socio-political cohesion in the area.

Moreover, after the Wuhan COVID -19 Pandemic, there has been a huge space for India and the USA cooperation to cope with China. Making alliances with common interested states in the region as well as at the global level, will help India to construct a balance of power against any hegemonic position of China in the region. Such common ground is much ready for India to strengthen its alignment with Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries to eliminate the risk of any miscalculation in the Indian Ocean, to ensure freedom of navigation, to safeguards its overall national and security interest in the region and in the Indo-Pacific as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am very thankful to Dr. Vijay Kumar and M. Kamraju for reading this paper and expressing their valuable views on the given topic. I am also grateful to Nematullah Anbery, Ph.D. Research Scholar in English at Arts College, Osmania University for reviewing this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Alok Bansal; Aayushi Ketkar, Geopolitics of Himalayan Region (Cultural, Political and Strategic Dimensions), Pentagon Press LLP, 2019.
2. Arshad, China's interventions in the Indian subcontinent: Challenges for Modi's foreign policy, SADF working paper, 2018.
3. S.D.Muni, India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context, Pentagon Press LLP, 2019.
4. Rahmati, Fidel, et.al. "A Study on Strategic Location of Siliguri Corridor and Its Issues." International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods (IJARESM), ISSN: 2455-6211, 2020.
5. Rahmati, Fidel, et.al. "A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications." International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM) (2020).
6. Sikri, Rajiv. Challenge and strategy: rethinking India's foreign policy. SAGE Publications India, 2009.
7. Zhang, Hongzhou, and Mingjiang Li. "Sino-Indian border disputes." ISPI Anal 181 (2013): 1-9.
8. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/border-face-off-why-china-tries-to-break-chickens-neck-to-isolate-northeast/articleshow/59420472.cms?from=mdr>. The economic times/ Retrieved-2020.
9. <https://www.clearias.com/india-china-border-disputes/> retrieved-2020.
10. <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/647603621394492062/2020>. Retrieved-2020.
11. Jackson, R; Sorenson, G. introduction to International relations- Theories and Approaches, Oxford University Press, Fifth Edition, 2013.
12. Rahmati, Fidel, et.al. "A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications." International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM) (2020).
13. Rahmati, Fidel, et.al. "A Study on China's one Belt-One Road Initiative." International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education (IJARIIE) 6, no. 4 (2020): 771–75. /Crossref.