

SHADOWED GOVERNANCE

The Microphysics of Borders: How Terrain, Weather, and Ecology Dictate Sovereignty

By Sanjay Aditya Singh

When the Bangladesh Nationalist Party swept the February polls, the mood in New Delhi was one of guarded relief. After eighteen months of an unelected interim administration that had drifted demonstrably toward Beijing and Islamabad, a democratically elected government — even a historically prickly one — looked like an opening. Tarique Rahman, returned from seventeen years of exile, won a landslide of roughly 209 seats and was sworn in as Prime Minister on 17 February. Prime Minister Modi congratulated him within hours, invoking the "deep-rooted historical and cultural ties" binding the two neighbours. The reset had a date on the calendar. Four months on, the calendar reads differently. The thaw is real, but it is already a thaw on a slippery slope — promising at the outset, complicated almost immediately by the accumulation of old grievances and new frictions. For the North East, which lives the Bangladesh relationship not as an abstraction but as a daily fact of fences, rivers and kinship, the early evidence is a study in how hard a reset is to sustain.

The hopeful signs came first. Rahman's government branded its foreign policy "Bangladesh First," with Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman framing it as a commitment to sovereignty and national welfare rather than alignment with any single power. On his first day in office, the foreign minister stressed Dhaka's desire for good, mutually beneficial relations with all neighbours — language read in Delhi as a deliberate softening after the Yunus years. India dispatched a seasoned figure, Dinesh Trivedi, as High Commissioner-designate.

Crucially for Indian planners, Jamaat-e-Islami — the Islamist party blamed for security headaches during earlier BNP coalitions — sits outside this government, widening the space for dialogue. Then the frictions surfaced, one after another. At the 57th Director-General-level border conference, held at the BSF headquarters in New Delhi in early June, Border Guard Bangladesh raised pointed objections to what it called deviations in India's fencing work, urging a halt to unauthorised construction near the frontier. Border "push-ins" and killings along the 4,096-kilometre line remain raw. On the rivers, the clock is running down on the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, which expires this year, reviving the old bitterness over the Farakka Barrage and dry-season flows — even as Chinese willingness to fund a Teesta project keeps Beijing hovering near the Siliguri Corridor. And a consular spat flared when Dhaka summoned India's Deputy High Commissioner after a senior adviser to Rahman was stopped at Delhi airport.

The symbolism of Rahman's diplomacy has not helped soothe nerves either. For his first foreign visits he chose Malaysia and China — a signal of economic diversification away from South Asia, and an attempt to re-energise infrastructure and strategic ties with Beijing after the Awami League years. None of this is hostile in itself; a sovereign government is entitled to court whom it pleases. But read from the frontier, it confirms that the BNP's instinct is to keep India at a measured distance, not to fall into its embrace. Hovering behind all of it is the Yunus inheritance — a set of facts an election cannot simply repeal. In the weeks before the vote, the interim government concluded a drone-manufacturing arrangement with a Chinese state firm, sited in a Chittagong special economic zone barely a hundred kilometres from the Indian border.



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It broke a post-1971 taboo by reopening trade, flights and military contact with Pakistan, and moved to acquire JF-17 Thunder jets jointly built by China and Pakistan. The release of an Ansarullah Bangla Team leader with al-Qaeda sympathies carried direct security implications for India's east. Rahman did not author these decisions, but he governs in their shadow, and unwinding them — where it is even possible — will be slow, costly and politically fraught.

For the North East specifically, the reset's success or failure translates into concrete outcomes. A cooperative Dhaka means smoother land transit to the landlocked states, an alternative to the overburdened Chicken's Neck, coordinated action against insurgent sanctuaries and infiltration, and a partner on illegal migration and the welfare of minorities across the border. A cool or adversarial Dhaka means the opposite — and revives the spectre of a coordinated squeeze, with China and Pakistan lending weight to pressure on India's eastern flank.

The complicating factor is domestic on both sides. India's border states are in an electoral season of their own, with Assam and West Bengal voting this year, and anti-Bangladesh rhetoric around migration and identity is a predictable feature of those campaigns.

In Bangladesh, Jamaat retains influence in dozens of border constituencies even while outside government. Identity politics, in other words, can derail diplomacy in either capital faster than any agreement can repair it.

Yet there is a structural logic pulling the other way. The commercial and connectivity linkages built over the past fifteen years were mutually beneficial; many carry arbitration clauses that make abrupt reversal expensive. Bangladesh needs India to develop; India needs Bangladesh for security, trade and access to the North East. That interdependence is the floor beneath the relationship, and it is unlikely to give way entirely.

The honest verdict, then, is neither the euphoria of February nor the gloom of June, but something in between: a reset worth pursuing, on terms that must be conditional, verified and patient. For the frontier, the months ahead are a test of whether two governments can let economic gravity outweigh political grievance. The North East has the most to gain if they can — and the most to lose if they cannot.



THE CHICKEN'S NECK TIGHTENS

Securing India's 22-Kilometre Lifeline

By Editorial Team

Every map of India's vulnerabilities returns to the same place: a strip of West Bengal barely 20 to 22 kilometres wide at its narrowest, wedged between Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan, with the China frontier in Sikkim only about 60 kilometres to the north. The Siliguri Corridor — the Chicken's Neck — is the sole land bridge between mainland India and its eight north-eastern states. Through it pass, by some estimates, over a million vehicles and thousands of tonnes of goods each day. Sever it, and the North East is cut off.

That geography has been a textbook anxiety for decades. What sharpened it over the past year were words. During a visit to China, Bangladesh's then-chief adviser Muhammad Yunus described the North East as "landlocked" and cast Bangladesh as the "only guardian of the ocean" for the region — an invitation, many in Delhi read, for Beijing to treat the Seven Sisters as an economic hinterland to be accessed through Bangladesh. The subsequent escorting of a Chinese envoy to a Teesta project area near the corridor only deepened the unease.

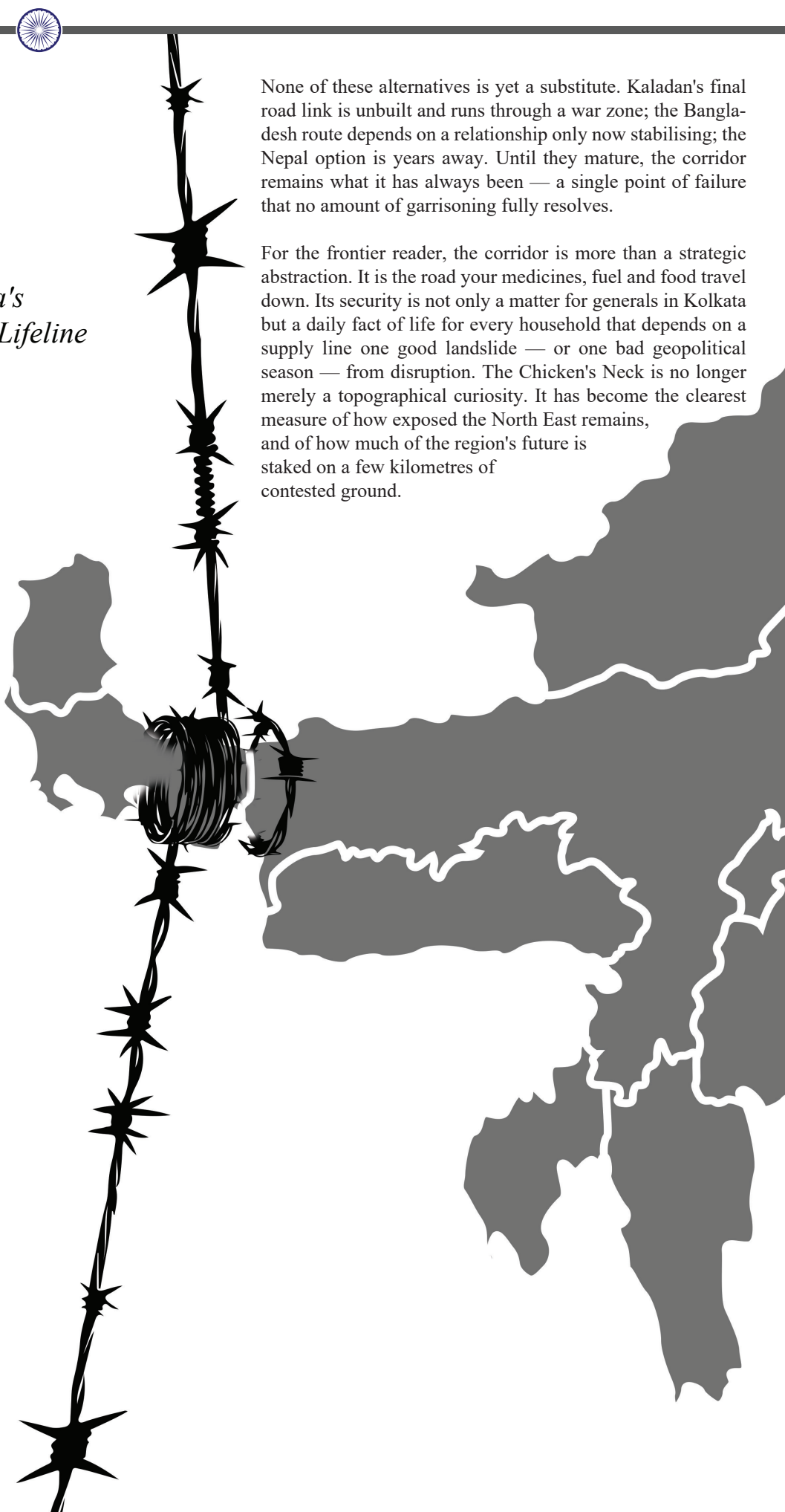
India's response has been to harden the neck. New military garrisons have been raised at Bamuni, Kishanganj and Chopra along the Indo-Bangladesh stretch, intended to guard against encirclement and infiltration. Surveillance and rapid-deployment infrastructure have been reinforced. The Eastern Command, headquartered in Kolkata, oversees the corridor's security, and force posture has been recalibrated to account for a worst-case scenario in which pressure comes simultaneously from more than one direction.

The deeper strategic worry is precisely that: a coordinated squeeze. Analysts increasingly speak of a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh axis capable of generating "social disruption" along India's eastern flank, testing whether the corridor can be choked through proxy instability rather than open conflict. Bhutan's unresolved boundary talks with China, and the memory of the 2017 Doklam standoff — fought over a plateau that overlooks the corridor — keep the northern approach equally live.

The long-term answer Delhi is pursuing is redundancy: routes that do not depend on the neck at all. One proposal would link Joghani in Bihar to Biratnagar in Nepal and onward to New Mal Junction in West Bengal by rail, reducing reliance on the single bottleneck. The Kaladan project through Myanmar and transit arrangements through Bangladesh are part of the same logic — alternative arteries to the Bay of Bengal that would loosen the corridor's stranglehold on the region's economy.

None of these alternatives is yet a substitute. Kaladan's final road link is unbuilt and runs through a war zone; the Bangladesh route depends on a relationship only now stabilising; the Nepal option is years away. Until they mature, the corridor remains what it has always been — a single point of failure that no amount of garrisoning fully resolves.

For the frontier reader, the corridor is more than a strategic abstraction. It is the road your medicines, fuel and food travel down. Its security is not only a matter for generals in Kolkata but a daily fact of life for every household that depends on a supply line one good landslide — or one bad geopolitical season — from disruption. The Chicken's Neck is no longer merely a topographical curiosity. It has become the clearest measure of how exposed the North East remains, and of how much of the region's future is staked on a few kilometres of contested ground.



WHEN THE WAR NEXT DOOR COMES HOME

*Myanmar's military has lost half its country.
The wreckage is washing up on our side of the line.*

By Editorial Team

Five years into Myanmar's civil war, the balance has tipped decisively against the junta. The military that seized power in February 2021 now controls well under half the country; in mid-2025 its ruling council formally dissolved, transferring authority to a national security body still chaired by Min Aung Hlaing. Whole commands have fallen — Lashio's north-eastern headquarters, the western command at Ann — and the Arakan Army holds most of Rakhine. By May 2026, the UN refugee agency counted some 299,000 people who had fled Myanmar into neighbouring states, India among them.

That collapse does not stay behind the fence. Along the 1,643-kilometre frontier with Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, the war's effects arrive as refugees, as fighters, as weapons and as drones. Mizoram has absorbed waves of Chin displaced by airstrikes and village burnings in Chin State; Manipur has felt the influx as a demographic and security tremor layered atop its own ethnic fracture. The junta's use of aerial bombing and even napalm near the boundary has repeatedly pushed civilians — and at times surrendering soldiers — across the line.

The most alarming development is the seepage of organised violence directly into Indian territory. In early May 2026, armed members of the Kuki National Army–Burma and an allied group from Myanmar reportedly attacked Tangkhul Naga villages on the Indian side, dragging cross-border militancy into the heart of Manipur's hills. Weeks earlier, in late April, militants of an NSCN splinter recorded the execution of men described as captured fighters — later identified by Burmese outlets as deserters who had crossed into Kamjong district. The drones now deployed in Manipur's Meitei-Kuki conflict are widely believed to have come from Myanmar, where both rebels and the junta use them extensively.

The history behind this is long. For decades, ethnic armies in Kachin and elsewhere trained Indian insurgents — Naga and ULFA cadres among them. Today the traffic runs both ways: Indian groups such as ULFA(I) and NSCN factions maintain camps in the Sagaing Region, while Myanmar's resistance groups draw support and shelter in Manipur and Mizoram. A protracted war, security planners warn, could reignite militancy across the North East that had taken years to dampen.

India's posture has been cautious and, by design, non-aligned. New Delhi has kept channels to the junta while avoiding open hostility from the pro-democracy resistance and ethnic armies — a balance that has spared it the enmity China courts by betting wholly on the generals. Beijing, by contrast, has propped up the junta, pressured border rebels to return captured towns, and guarded its Rakhine investments with Chinese security personnel. Every Indian tilt toward that approach risks alienating the very forces likely to govern Myanmar's borderlands in the years ahead.

For the frontier, the practical consequences are immediate. Refugee camps strain thin local resources, particularly in Mizoram. The deepening of a shared "Zo" identity across the Chin-Mizo-Kuki belt revives older questions about regional aspiration versus national interest. And the steady flow of arms, narcotics and trained fighters corrodes the fragile order that holds the hills together.

The uncomfortable lesson of this year is that the frontier is no longer a buffer. It is a fracture line where a collapsing state to the east meets a securitised one to the west, and where the distance between "their war" and "our problem" has narrowed to the width of a forest path. Managing it will take more than fencing — it will take a Myanmar policy that prepares for the borderlands the war is actually producing.



MANIPUR'S FRAGILE DAWN

*A new government,
a first handshake in
three years —
and violence that
refuses to end*

By Editorial Team

On 4 February 2026, after nearly a year of direct central rule, President's Rule was revoked in Manipur and Yumnam Khemchand Singh, a Meitei BJP legislator, was sworn in as Chief Minister. To project inclusiveness, the new dispensation arranged two deputy chief ministers — one from the Kuki-Zo community, Nemcha Kipgen, and one from the Naga People's Front — with the home department placed in experienced hands. After more than two and a half years of an ethnic conflict that has killed hundreds and displaced some 60,000 people, the formation of a "popular government" was meant to signal a turn toward healing.

The symbolism was immediately complicated. Kipgen took her oath not in the Meitei-majority Imphal valley — which members of her Kuki-Zo community still cannot safely enter — but in Delhi's Manipur Bhawan. Her decision drew sharp protest from Kuki-Zo organisations, who pointed to the "Guwahati Declaration," a resolution by civil society bodies, Suspension of Operations groups and legislators that the community would not join a popular government unless the Centre conceded a separate administration for the hill areas, in the form of a Union Territory with a legislature.

There were, briefly, hopeful signs. On 21 March 2026, the new Chief Minister held a confidence-building meeting with Kuki-Zo representatives in Guwahati — the first formal engagement between the state leadership and the community in nearly three years. For a moment it looked like the beginning of a political roadmap.

The optimism did not last. Fresh Naga-Kuki tensions surfaced, demonstrating that the conflict had not merely persisted but mutated into new alignments. The valley and hills remain divided by securitised buffer zones. Officials, police and bureaucrats are effectively confined to their own ethnic territories — Meitei and Naga officers in the valley, Kuki officials in Churachandpur and Kangpokpi — a visible sign of a state that has lost administrative cohesion. The Chief Minister's early characterisation of the violence as a "communication gap" between two communities was condemned by observers as a minimisation of what had been, from its first hours, an organised campaign of killing.

The cross-border dimension makes the wound harder to close. Drones used in the conflict are traced to Myanmar; arms looted from state armouries circulate through the same channels that move fighters across the Sagaing frontier. Indian Army intelligence has assessed that surrendered cadres of valley-based insurgent groups trained civilian mobs in the use of looted weapons, and that around a hundred active cadres crossed from Myanmar to fight on the Meitei side. Meitei armed organisations such as Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, and Kuki armed groups drawing on cross-border kin, both operate in a landscape where the international border is more sieve than barrier.

The human toll continues to accumulate even under the new government. A bomb blast in a Bishnupur village in April 2026 killed two small children and triggered weeks of protest. Sporadic killings in the valley and along the hill margins have kept the security forces stretched, with central battalions still deployed across the divide.

Manipur, often called a miniature India for its diversity, cannot be governed as a collection of separated ethnic enclaves. The test for the Khemchand Singh government is whether it can move beyond ribbon-cutting and ceremony to the harder work of security, justice and genuine dialogue with Meitei, Naga, Pangal and Kuki-Zo civil society alike. A dawn has technically arrived. Whether it becomes daylight depends on choices not yet made.



FENCE OR BRIDGE? THE BORDER THAT DIVIDES KIN

A ₹31,000-crore barrier is rising along a line that for generations was no barrier at all.

By Editorial Team

For most of independent India's history, the boundary with Myanmar was a soft line. Under the Free Movement Regime, members of border hill tribes could cross up to 16 kilometres into the other country without papers, on a border pass — an acknowledgement that the colonial frontier had cut a single people in two. Naga, Mizo, Kuki-Zo and Chin communities lived, traded, married and worshipped across it as though it were not there.

That arrangement is being dismantled. In February 2024, citing security and demographic concerns sharpened by the Manipur conflict and the Myanmar war, the Centre announced it would scrap the FMR and fence the 1,643-kilometre border. The Cabinet's security committee gave in-principle approval to a fencing-and-roads programme costed at roughly ₹31,000 crore, to be executed over a decade. By late 2025, only about 30 kilometres — a sliver, including a stretch at Moreh in Manipur — had actually been fenced; the Border Roads Organisation's timeline stretches to the mid-2030s. A new Indo-Myanmar Border Force, drawing battalions from the Assam Rifles and the ITBP, is to guard the line.

In December 2024, recognising the depth of cross-border kinship, Delhi softened the edges: residents within 10 kilometres of the Manipur-Myanmar border may still cross, but only through 43 designated points where the Assam Rifles issue regulated border passes. It is a compromise between an open frontier and a sealed one — and it satisfies few.

The opposition has been fierce and organised. The Nagaland Assembly passed a formal resolution against both the FMR's termination and the fence. Mizoram's Chief Minister urged the Home Ministry to let the regime continue in his state. The United Naga Council and other bodies have submitted memoranda and met the Governor, arguing that fencing without

consulting border communities tears apart shared ancestry and livelihood. For the Nagas in particular, the border itself — traced to the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826 and a string of colonial demarcations drawn without local consent — carries no moral authority. More than 250 villages, home to some 300,000 people, sit within ten kilometres of the line.

The government sees a different picture. Officials point to insurgents who slip into Myanmar after attacks, to drug cartels and arms smugglers exploiting the open border, and to demographic anxieties in sensitive states. The porous frontier, in this reading, is a national-security liability that the war next door has made untenable. The control of long stretches of the Myanmar side by ethnic armed organisations such as the Arakan Army only complicates joint surveys and orderly management.

Both readings contain truth, and that is precisely the difficulty. The frontier is simultaneously a security problem the state cannot ignore and a social organism the fence threatens to sever. A barrier may reduce infiltration and smuggling; it will also, by its nature, divide families and rupture customary economies built on movement.

The deeper question the fence raises is about what kind of frontier India wants. The line with Nepal and Bhutan remains open by treaty, an expression of trust. The lines with Pakistan, Bangladesh and now Myanmar are being hardened, an expression of threat. As the wire goes up across the Indo-Burman ranges, the North East is being asked to accept that its eastern boundary has shifted — from a bridge between kin into a managed perimeter of the nation-state. How that shift is handled, and how much the affected communities are heard, will shape the frontier's loyalty for a generation.





DAMMING THE TSANGPO: THE COMING WATER CONTEST

By Editorial Team

The river that Assam knows as the Brahmaputra begins in Tibet as the Yarlung Tsangpo, drops dramatically through the great bend near the Arunachal border, and enters India as the Siang before spreading across the plains. On that bend, in Medog county roughly 50 kilometres from the Indian frontier, China is constructing what is set to become the world's largest hydropower project — a cascade scheme rated at around 60,000 megawatts, some three times the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. Construction, monitored through satellite imagery and intelligence, has intensified despite India's standing objections.

Beijing insists the project is for clean energy and poses no threat downstream. Delhi is not reassured. The anxieties are layered. The first is ecological: damming on this scale could alter the sediment loads that build and fertilise the floodplains of Assam, disrupt river ecology and fisheries, and change the flood pulse that the region's agriculture is calibrated to. The second is seismic: the site sits in one of the most earthquake-prone zones on the planet, where the Indian and Eurasian plates grind together, raising the spectre of a catastrophic dam failure upstream of millions of people. The third, and most strategic, is leverage. With no water-sharing treaty between the two countries, India fears Beijing could one day use upstream control as a tap — inducing drought by withholding, or flood by releasing, during a period of tension.

India's answer is to build counter-capacity. In Arunachal, the proposed Upper Siang Multipurpose Project — envisaging a dam on the order of 300 metres high and over 11 gigawatts of capacity — is being framed explicitly as a strategic buffer: a reservoir large enough to absorb sudden upstream surges and regulate flows. More broadly, India has signalled a vast hydropower push across the North East, with figures running to scores of gigawatts and a price tag in the tens of billions of dollars, much of it concentrated in Arunachal — territory China claims as "South Tibet." Arunachal's Chief Minister has called the effort a national-security necessity and a safety valve against any upstream weaponisation of water.

Upstream in Tibet, China is building the largest dam on earth. Downstream, Assam and Arunachal are watching the water.

Here the contest acquires a sharper edge, because it is not only about water. Both states are tying these mega-projects to AI-enabled grids, real-time monitoring and data infrastructure, turning the Himalayan rivers into an arena where control of water mirrors control of information. India's monitoring networks, flood-forecasting systems and sediment modelling are being upgraded with friendly external backing; China is folding its dams into a centralised "smart energy" system. The Brahmaputra is becoming a flashpoint of Asia's energy and data geopolitics.

The communities in between are rarely the loudest voices, but they have the most at stake. The Adi and other groups in the Siang valley have raised concerns about displacement and the ecological cost of India's own dams — a reminder that a project pitched as a shield against China is also, for the people whose land it floods, a profound disruption. Downstream in Assam, where the Brahmaputra already governs the rhythm of life and loss each monsoon, the prospect of an upstream giant reshaping the river's behaviour is not abstract.

India contributes the great majority of the Brahmaputra's flow through its own rainfall and snowmelt, which gives it a measure of independence from Tibetan releases. But hydrology offers no substitute for diplomacy. Shared rivers demand data exchange, transparency and trust — and these are precisely what the relationship lacks. Until a water dialogue replaces the dam race, the Tsangpo will remain what it is fast becoming: a frontier of competition disguised as development, with the North East directly in its path.



'SOUTH TIBET' AND THE LONG WATCH ON THE EASTERN FRONT

The India-China thaw is real. So is the airbase rising 70 miles from Tawang.

By Editorial Team

Of all the North East's frontiers, the one with China is the least populated and the most consequential. China claims the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as "Zangnan," or South Tibet, and has spent the past year making that claim louder — even as the broader relationship has, on the surface, thawed.

The thaw is genuine but shallow. Following the 2024 patrolling agreement and disengagement in eastern Ladakh, and the first Special Representatives' talks in years, 2025 brought a measured normalisation: reduced economic restrictions, resumed dialogue, a posture officials describe as "stable but vigilant." Verification patrols resumed in early 2026. Yet the core dispute over the Line of Actual Control is no closer to resolution, and the de-escalation India demands — a full pullback of the tens of thousands of troops massed since 2020 — has stalled.

On the eastern sector specifically, the signals run the other way. In 2025, China renamed dozens of places across Arunachal, an assertion of cartographic ownership Delhi dismissed as preposterous. Satellite analysis revealed China constructing hardened aircraft shelters roughly 40 kilometres from the Arunachal border, and continuing to build up an airbase at Lhunze, only about 70 miles from Tawang — a site of immense significance to Tibetan Buddhism and a flashpoint since the December 2022 clash there. Across the Tibetan plateau, Beijing has raised an estimated 628 "border defence villages," some on disputed ground, and upgraded scores of airfields, extending the reach of its air power along the frontier.

India is racing to match the infrastructure. The Sela Tunnel, opened in 2024, gives all-weather access toward the Tawang sector. The far more ambitious Arunachal Frontier Highway — some 1,840 kilometres running within about 20 kilometres of the LAC — broke ground with the Prime Minister's presence in 2025, intended to speed troop movement and surveillance along the world's longest disputed boundary.

To counter Chinese settlement and depopulation on the Indian side, the Vibrant Villages Programme is channelling investment into hundreds of border villages across Arunachal, Sikkim and beyond, on the logic that a populated frontier is a defended one.

The Tawang factor adds a dimension that ordinary boundary disputes lack. The question of the Dalai Lama's eventual succession sits squarely on this frontier. Beijing worries that the exiled spiritual leadership could use Tawang as leverage to galvanise Tibetans; Delhi treats the matter as one of religious freedom. Either way, Tawang is now a node where territorial, military and spiritual contests intersect.

Small incidents keep puncturing the diplomatic calm. In late 2025, an Indian national was detained at a Chinese airport because she had been born in Arunachal — Beijing's way of pressing its claim through bureaucracy. Each such episode reminds Delhi that the thaw has limits, and that the limits run through the North East.

For the frontier reader, the eastern sector is a study in patience. There is no firing across this stretch of the LAC; there has been no fatal clash in Arunachal in years. What there is, instead, is a slow, grinding competition in roads, runways, villages and maps — "salami slicing," as Indian planners call China's incremental method. It is a contest measured not in battles but in concrete poured and villages settled, conducted over decades.

The danger is complacency. A thawed relationship is harder to advance than a frozen one, because the easy gestures are exhausted and only the hard questions remain. On the eastern front, the watchword is the one India's own commanders repeat: vigilance. The North East's quietest frontier is also the one where the long game is most relentlessly being played.

JASWANT SINGH RAWAT

The Soldier Who Never Came Off Duty

By Prachujya Raj Gautam

Every army has its battle honours. Every regiment has its heroes. But only a handful of soldiers transcend history to become something greater, a living presence in the minds of those who continue to guard the nation's frontiers. Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat, Maha Vir Chakra, is one such name.

More than six decades after the guns fell silent in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, soldiers travelling to Tawang still stop at Jaswant Garh, not merely to pay tribute, but to report to a comrade they believe never abandoned his post. His room is maintained as if he were still serving. His boots are polished, his uniform neatly pressed, his bed made each morning with military precision. Tea is placed beside his photograph, and letters addressed to "Baba Jaswant" continue to arrive from soldiers, civilians and travellers alike. What began as remembrance has become one of the Indian Army's most enduring traditions, a testament to a soldier whose duty, many believe, did not end with death.

The story begins in November 1962, when the North-East Frontier Agency, now Arunachal Pradesh, became the theatre of one of independent India's gravest military crises. The men of 4

Garhwal Rifles were tasked with defending the strategic heights near Nuranang against relentless Chinese assaults. Among them was a 21-year-old rifleman from Pauri Garhwal. As enemy machine-gun fire pinned down Indian defences, Jaswant Singh Rawat volunteered, along with Lance Naik Trilok Singh Negi and Rifleman Gopal Singh Gusain, to neutralise the position. Crawling under intense fire, the trio destroyed the machine-gun nest and captured the weapon. While returning, Negi and Gusain were killed, and Jaswant himself was seriously wounded. Despite his injuries, he succeeded in bringing the captured gun back to Indian lines, earning a posthumous Maha Vir Chakra, India's second-highest wartime gallantry award.

Military citations, however, tell only part of the story. Beyond the official record lies a legend that has echoed through these mountains for generations. According to regimental lore and Monpa oral tradition, Jaswant Singh refused to withdraw after his unit had fallen back. Assisted by two young Monpa women—Sela and Nura—he reportedly positioned rifles across multiple bunkers, moving rapidly between them to create the illusion of a much larger defending force. For nearly 72 hours, the advancing Chinese troops are said to have believed they were facing an entire company.

Whether every detail unfolded exactly this way remains debated. Official records are cautious, while folklore is naturally expansive. Yet, as one retired Garhwal Rifles officer aptly remarked, "Legends are not born because every detail can be proven; they are born because generations of soldiers find truth in the courage they represent." That perhaps explains why Jaswant Singh Rawat's story continues to inspire long after eyewitnesses have passed into history. The Battle Honour 'Nuranang', awarded to the 4 Garhwal Rifles, remains the only battle honour conferred upon an Indian Army unit for actions during the 1962 war. Yet it is not only battlefield distinction that has immortalised Jaswant Singh Rawat—it is the remarkable culture that has grown around his memory.



Serving soldiers posted in the region seldom speak of him in the past tense. To them, he is simply "Baba Jaswant." Visitors to Jaswant Garh hear stories passed down through generations of troops: sentries sensing an unseen presence on lonely winter nights, footsteps around deserted bunkers, or equipment mysteriously found neatly arranged after being carelessly left behind. Veteran caretakers even recount mornings when his bed appeared disturbed or his boots seemed to have shifted from where they had been placed the previous evening. None of these stories seek historical validation. Instead, they reveal the power of military tradition and the comfort such beliefs provide to soldiers serving in some of the world's harshest terrain.

Another enduring local legend speaks of a lone soldier appearing through blinding snowstorms to guide stranded travellers across Sela Pass, only to vanish into the mist. The Monpa community simply smiles and says, "Baba still watches over his mountains." Equally enduring is the story of Sela and Nura, remembered not merely as companions in battle but as symbols of the countless civilians whose quiet courage has often stood beside soldiers in defending the nation. During a memorial ceremony at Jaswant Garh, a serving officer reflected, "Every soldier who comes here leaves believing that courage never dies. Jaswant Singh is remembered not because he fought alone, but because he chose duty over survival." That sentiment captures why his story continues to resonate across generations.

In 2024, as the Indian Army commemorated Nuranang Day, soldiers, veterans, local residents and members of Jaswant Singh Rawat's family gathered once again to honour the battle that shaped one of the Army's greatest legends. It was not merely a remembrance of the past but a reaffirmation of the courage, sacrifice and regimental spirit that continue to define those guarding India's eastern frontier. As the sun sets behind the snow-clad ridges of Tawang and military convoys continue towards the border, they pass a modest memorial where a young rifleman is believed to remain forever on guard. History records that he fell in battle in November 1962. Military tradition quietly suggests otherwise.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

There was a time when India's North East was described as a frontier—distant from the centres of power, disconnected from the country's strategic imagination, and viewed largely through the prism of insurgency or infrastructure deficits. That vocabulary no longer serves us.

Today, the North East is not India's edge. It is India's eastern hinge.

Every major geopolitical shift unfolding across Asia now finds its first expression in this region. The turbulence in Myanmar, the political recalibration in Bangladesh, China's expanding strategic footprint along the Himalayan frontier, and the growing contest over rivers, connectivity corridors, energy, migration and cross-border commerce all converge here. The questions confronting the North East are therefore no longer regional concerns; they are national strategic imperatives.

This edition of The Frontier Insights examines these convergences through ten dispatches from the field.

Myanmar remains the immediate strategic challenge. A prolonged civil conflict has transformed a neighbouring nation into an unpredictable security environment where armed groups, refugee movements, illicit economies and competing foreign interests intersect. Stability along the Indo-Myanmar frontier is no longer merely a border management issue—it has become central to India's Act East ambitions and its wider Indo-Pacific engagement.

Equally significant is the evolving relationship with Bangladesh. The political landscape across the border continues to reshape questions of migration, trade, river management and regional diplomacy. For the North East, Bangladesh is not simply a neighbour; it is the principal gateway through which economic integration with the Bay of Bengal can become reality.

To the north, China's sustained investments in border infrastructure and dual-use logistics remind us that modern competition is increasingly determined by roads, tunnels, fibre networks, satellites and supply chains rather than military deployments alone. Strategic preparedness begins long before a crisis emerges.

Yet geopolitics is only one layer of the frontier.

The rivers that descend from the Himalayas, the forests that sustain border communities, the indigenous societies whose kinship networks predate modern boundaries, and the emerging aspirations of a young generation together define a frontier that is as human as it is strategic. Security cannot be separated from development, nor diplomacy from ecology.

The North East therefore demands a new framework of thinking—one that views borders not merely as defensive lines, but as living spaces where governance, commerce, culture and national security reinforce one another.

As India prepares for the next decade of regional transformation, the success of its eastern strategy will depend less on declarations made in New Delhi than on the resilience built in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.

This publication seeks to contribute to that conversation. Our objective is not merely to report developments but to interpret the deeper forces shaping them, connecting events on the frontier to decisions that influence the future of the Republic.

For in the twenty-first century, the North East is no longer where India's map ends.

It is where India's future increasingly begins.

1. A New Dhaka, a Cautious Delhi: What the BNP's Return Means for the North East

After eighteen months of turbulence, Bangladesh's February verdict reopens the door to a frontier reset — but on conditions.

For the better part of two years the eastern frontier has lived with an uncomfortable truth: the country across the Brahmaputra's lower reaches had turned, if not hostile, then markedly cooler. That phase has now formally closed. On 12 February 2026, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies swept roughly 212 of 300 parliamentary seats, a two-thirds majority that returned the party to power for the first time since 2006 and installed Tarique Rahman as Prime Minister. Turnout climbed to about 60 percent, well above the disputed 2024 figure, and these were the first national polls in three decades fought without either Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia — the former exiled in India, the latter dead weeks before the vote.

For New Delhi, the result is an opening. Prime Minister Modi was among the first to congratulate Rahman, and Indian commentary has framed the moment as a chance to rebuild a relationship badly frayed under the Yunus-led interim administration. For the North East specifically, the stakes are concrete. A friendlier Dhaka means smoother land transit through Bangladesh to the landlocked states, better coordination against insurgent sanctuaries and infiltration, and breathing room for the Siliguri Corridor.

Yet optimism must be conditional. The interim period left structural facts on the ground that an election does not erase. Barely two weeks before the polls, an unelected caretaker government signed a drone deal with China's CETC, establishing a military-and-civilian drone facility in a Chittagong special economic zone roughly a hundred kilometres from the Indian border. Dhaka under Yunus also broke a post-1971 taboo by reopening direct trade, flights and military contact with Pakistan. And Jamaat-e-Islami's surge, with its strength concentrated in constituencies hugging the Indian frontier, is a longer-term concern that the BNP's mandate does not dissolve.

Several flashpoints will test the reset early. The Teesta water-sharing question remains unresolved, with Chinese interest in a Teesta management project still on the table. The Ganga treaty has lapsed without renewal. And the question of Hasina's extradition — she faces a death sentence at home — hangs awkwardly over every overture. Rahman himself has signalled that public sentiment in Bangladesh wants relations kept "cool," even as he speaks of mutual respect.

For frontier communities in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and the Barak Valley, the practical questions are old ones: cattle smuggling, fencing gaps along the 4,096-km line, the welfare of minorities across the border, and the recurring spectre of demographic anxiety. With Assam and West Bengal both heading into state elections, anti-Bangladesh rhetoric is likely to sharpen on the Indian side too — a reminder that identity politics in both countries can derail diplomacy faster than any treaty can repair it.

The sober reading is this: the BNP is a more workable interlocutor than the alternatives, and the door is open. But a reset built on goodwill alone will not hold. It must be calibrated, verified and grounded in the frontier's hard realities — water, security, trade and trust — rather than in the warmth of a single congratulatory message.



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FRONTIER INSIGHTS

Published by Seemanta Chetana Mancha Purvottar



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