

# THE HIMALAYAS: A NATURAL BARRIER AND STRATEGIC CHALLENGE FOR INDIA

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**Accepted:** 07.05.2023

**Published:** 01.06.2023

**Keywords:** Frontiers, Himalayas, Geopolitics, and Strategic Buffer States.

## **Abstract**

*The Himalayas are considered from the perspectives of both a physical obstacle and a geopolitical one for India in this analysis. India, China (Tibet), Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan, as well as other nations in South Asia, all have their climates and landscapes influenced by the Himalayas. There is discussion of the geological process that led to the formation of the Himalayas as a consequence of the collision between the Indo-Australian tectonic plates.*

*The report emphasizes the Himalayas' strategic importance to the Indian Subcontinent in light of the Indian Ocean's geopolitical relevance. It acknowledges the existence of serious difficulties in the Himalayan area, which are of vital strategic relevance to India. Most of these problems stem from geopolitical tensions, such as disagreements over territory with China, Pakistan, and Nepal. The majority of the material included in the report was gleaned from secondary sources, which include things like books, journals, reliable online sources, grey literature, and websites. The purpose of this article is to analyze this data in order to throw light on how to reduce India's strategic problems in the Himalayan area.*

*Scholars, academics, politicians, decision-makers, and others interested in foreign policy, security, and strategic influence at borders will find the insights given in this article useful. The research adds to our knowledge of the intricate dynamics in the Himalayas and sheds light on approaches that might assist India meet the strategic difficulties it faces there. In sum, this study investigates the Himalayas' double role as a natural barrier and a geopolitical issue for India. The report highlights the region's geopolitical importance and offers suggestions for addressing the strategic problems India faces. Those tasked with formulating foreign policies and tactics in the Himalayan environment may find this study's conclusions useful.*

## Paper Identification



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## Introduction

Throughout the course of history, the Himalayas have always played an essential role in the fulfilment of crucial strategic functions. During the time when this region was governed by the British, the Himalayas played an important strategic role in the region by limiting any foreign influences on British territories and protecting British economic interests by encouraging the development of trade routes and links. Both of these were among the most significant contributions that the Himalayas made to the surrounding area.

It was extremely hard for India to preserve the British legacy due to the various internal issues that India faced after 1947 and two important geopolitical shifts that happened in the area, namely India's partition and the Chinese military involvement in Tibet. These events combined to make it almost impossible for India to safeguard the British heritage. Because of this, the first scenario produced an instant new neighbor in the form of Pakistan, but the second scenario resulted in India not being present in Tibet.

India and China together account about one-third of the world's total population and have the potential to become major international powers in the not too distant future. Both nations' economic, agricultural, and urban development are mostly reliant on the cross-border resources provided by the Himalaya.

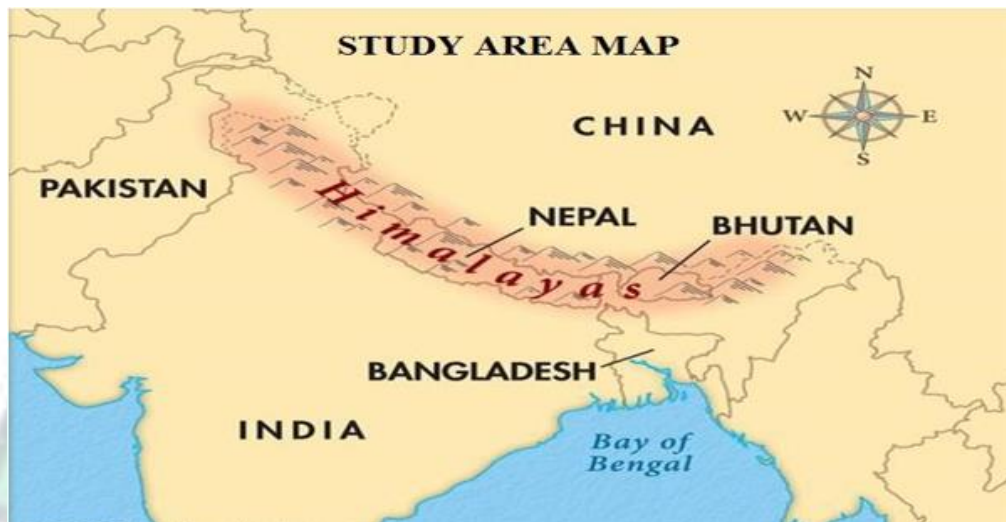
The geopolitical, social, and economic stability of the area will be put at risk if such exploitation of these resources is allowed to continue.

## Study Area

The Himalaya Mountains, which are located in Asia, serve as a physical boundary between the Tibetan Plateau and the Plains of the Indian Subcontinent. The Himalaya Mountains are located in Asia.

Mount Everest is the name of the Himalayan Mountain that rises to the greatest elevation and may be found in both Tibet and Nepal. The Himalayan area is the source of many of the world's

most significant and well-known rivers, including the Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus, and Yamuna, amongst others. The areas of “the Himalayas served as a hub that connected the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush to the northwest, to the north, and to the south, the arc of the Himalaya was separated from the Tibetan Plateau by the Indo-Gangetic plain”.



**Figure 1, Study area Map of Himalaya**

**Source:** *Internet*

“The mountain range known as the Himalayas may be found in five different countries: Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Both Afghanistan and Bangladesh are a component of the larger Hindu Kush Himalayan River system that includes both of those countries”.

### **Objective**

The Himalayas and the dangers they pose to India's national security are the topics that will be investigated in this article.

### **Data and Methodology**

Throughout the process of producing this research, secondary material from a variety of sources, including books, published journals, newspapers, official government policies, legitimate internet sources, and websites, was used. In doing the analysis for this publication, great efforts have been made to ensure that the overarching purpose of the research is taken into consideration.

### **Brief Literature Review**

The assessment of the available literature was carried out in great detail, and the following is a condensed list of the literatures that were deemed to be the most important and relevant:

In the opening to their edited book titled “Geopolitics of the Himalayan Region- cultural, political, and strategic dimensions,” Bansal. A, and Ketkar. A, (2019) noted that the Himalayas



have been an essential component of Indian Geopolitics ever since the Westphalian nation-state system was in place. Therefore, strategic and national security language that does not take into consideration the importance and significance of Himalayan geopolitics will not be able to match the realities of the situation and would be unsuccessful.

In SD, Muni's (2019) article titled "India and the Unfolding Himalayan Geostrategic Context," he focuses on the most significant difficulties faced by "the geostrategic context of the Himalaya, such as the melting of glaciers as a result of climate change, continuing socio-political unrest, and the increasing might of China. He has provided some suggestions for the actions that India need to do in order to meet the issues that are facing it. He has also remarked that it is a smart alternative to use India's soft power to counter China's hard power given that, keeping in mind India's strengths and Chinese weaknesses". This was indicated in the previous sentence.

In Bansa, A.'s (2019) article titled "Gilgit-Baltistan and Aksai Chin: Indian Territories under Foreign Occupation," he discusses the regions of Jammu and Kashmir that are now governed by China and Pakistan respectively. These regions are occupied by a foreign power.

A research paper titled "Strategic Location of Siliguri Corridor and Its Issues" was authored by Rahmati, F. et al. in the year 2020. The importance of the Himalayas is the primary topic of this study. "It serves as a natural barrier in the physiography of India and is a crucial site for the Siliguri Corridor, which links the states in India's northeast with the rest of the country. As a result, this demonstrates the strategic significance of the area for India, while at the same time demonstrating that the Siliguri corridor is very susceptible as a result of its placement on the boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal". China's goal has always been to strengthen both its regional domination and its security throughout the area by infiltrating the nations that are geographically next to it.

Rahmati, F; et.al. (2020) asserts 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 strong basis in geopolitical issues. The article was published by Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. This information may be found in Rahmati's article, which is titled A Study on India-China Current Geopolitical Issues and Implications. It is also speculated that during this epidemic China sought to take advantage to influence in the area with its own understanding; nevertheless, the present picture is such that the majority of democratic nations of the globe side with the Indian point of view and blame China for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic".

To summarize all of the key aspects brought up in the aforementioned literature, it can be said that the strategic problems posed by the Himalayas have been researched extensively, although there are still undiscovered facets to investigate. As a result, within the context of this research, we are endeavoring to analyze the concealed breadth of the subject field.

### **Strategic Challenges**

China's statement is most crucial to India in the Himalayan region over boundary disputes, Kashmir that is controlled by Pakistan, and the Himalayan nations of Nepal and Bhutan. These are the four vital locations in the Himalayan region.

China's ascent to power since the turn of the current century has shed light on the geopolitics of Asia, and the Himalayan area is not an exception to this trend. The moves that China is making in the area are being motivated by geopolitical as well as strategic considerations, and these considerations may be broken down into the following important points:

1. To monitor and safeguard its vulnerability in the Chinese states of Tibet and Xinjiang, therefore, it resonates China's presence in the states of South Asia;
2. China's economic development is becoming more reliant on international markets for the sale of its manufactured goods and exports of its products in order to maintain its own economic growth. Therefore, nations that are geographically near to South Asia and have a population of around 1.891 billion people and an average annual growth rate of approximately 6% are a strong alternative.
3. If China wants to maintain its preeminence in Asia, it may need to compete with the United States in the South Asian area.
4. A possible additional cause for China's participation in the Himalayan area is climate change and physiographic issues such as water, geostrategic positions, security, flood, landslide, and earthquakes, among other natural disasters.

### **Border dispute between India-China**

Since 1947, India and China have been engaged in a protracted territorial dispute over an area that spans 125,000 km<sup>2</sup> and contains three sectors, including the Western sector (also known as Aksai Chin or the eastern section of larger Kashmir). The eastern sector is the second sector, which comprises the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India and has a total area of 90000 square kilometers. This region was captured by China during the conflict in 1962; however, in the years that followed, China agreed to a unilateral ceasefire and pulled back from the international border at McMahan Line in Arunachal Pradesh. However, China has recently asserted its sovereignty over the whole of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The third sector is the central one, and it is made up of numerous smaller pieces of territory that are located across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). China has acknowledged India's sovereignty over the Sikkim region, hence this sector is considered to be part of the central sector.

It is the common boundary between India and China that spans an area that is 38 thousand square kilometers and is known as Aksai Chin. It is a desolate region with a high height of 5000 meters above sea level and is nearly completely deserted. However, it is of great strategic importance to China since it links Tibet to the Chinese state of Xinjiang.

In the year 1950, the Republic of China constructed a 1200 km<sup>2</sup> highway to connect the province of Xinjiang to Tibet. Of this route, 179 km<sup>2</sup> ran through the Aksai Chin, which is now contested territory between China and India. The building of this roadway was the spark that ignited the India–China conflict in 1962, and ever since then, the land in question has remained a contentious debate ground.

In addition to problems over the boundaries between both nations, China is also concerned about the state of security in the Xinjiang region. It has been assumed that the effort known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is congruent with this. In 2017, the project was carried out and it went across an area of Kashmir that is managed by Pakistan in order to safeguard the volatile Xinjiang region.

China has never stopped protesting about the presence of Pakistan's extremist Islamist groups in the region of Xinjiang, where they have been active. Both China and Pakistan share a hostility for India, which unites them in their pursuit of a shared objective. One of the disputes among the three nations is over Kashmir, however China has never stopped supporting Pakistan for these four reasons:

- Due to the fact that Aksai Chin is under Chinese sovereignty despite the fact that historically it has never been a part of any of the regions that belonged to either China or India. Up until 1948, it functioned as an autonomous territory;
- After the war between India and China in 1962, Pakistan handed up the trans-Himalaya Shaksgam Valley (a vital area) to China;
- Through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) proposal, linking the northern regions of Gilgit–Baltistan to Xinjiang as well as the Indus Valley and the Gwadar port;
- China consistently backs Pakistan in its conflict with India, both diplomatically and by using its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). China also backs Pakistan's efforts to develop nuclear weapons.



A number of border skirmishes eventually escalated into a full-scale war between India and China in the year 1962. But they were unable to find a solution to the problems caused by the unmarked boundary, which is referred to as the “Line of Actual Control” (LAC). throughout addition to that, there was a lack of 'trust' and dependability throughout the history of interactions between India and China.

This may be seen by the recent military assault that took place in Galwan Valley on June 15, 2020. This offensive led to discussions on a bilateral and trilateral level, but none of them were able to provide a solution. The Line of Actual Control will not be defined by China via the exchange and acceptance of maps because China lacks the willingness to do so.

Keep in mind that finding solutions to geopolitical problems takes far more time than fixing diplomatic problems. As a result, India and China are now engaged in a zero-sum game that cannot be resolved without significant changes in the status quo of the area. Both of the powers have shown that they are dissatisfied with the present status quo and have pursued measures to increase their respective portions of the power in the area.

### **China's penetration into Himalayan's smaller nations**

India and China are not only the two leading powers in the South Asian region, but also have significant global impacts. The foreign policies of smaller Himalayan states like Nepal and Bhutan are affected by their activities both inside and outside of their own borders.

Beginning in 1975 and continuing ahead, China and Nepal established increasingly closer ties, which eventually led to Nepal's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with Pakistan. Lhasa and Kathmandu will be connected by motorways as part of China's \$ 8.5 billion aid package, which will facilitate the flow of people and products and secure their safe exchange. China has grown more involved in the political arena of Nepal as a result of the extensive support and assistance it has provided to Nepal in the form of, for example, the construction of roads, the provision of transit to other countries, the printing of its currency, the exercise of combined military operations, and the endeavor to make Nepal a good follower of Communist objectives. Because of this, Nepal has become more estranged from India.

In a manner quite similar to that, China has been attempting to control Bhutan in favor of its national interests; however, it does not seem to have accomplished its aim as of yet. Doklam is seen as contested territory between China and Bhutan in China's eyes, although Bhutan views it as part of its territory.

It is adjacent to India's “Siliguri Corridor,” which connects seven of the north-eastern states of the Indian subcontinent, and Doklam may be found at the tri-junction where India, Bhutan, and

China meet. Because of its proximity to India geographically, Bhutan has a highly important strategic role in the Indian government's foreign policy. The relationship between Bhutan and India is a positive one, which may work against China's interests.

In close proximity to the three-way intersection described earlier, China is constructing new highways and bridges. It would provide China with a more direct access to India's strategically sensitive Siliguri Corridor.

This has given India reason to be concerned about China's effort in the region, and it is this fear that has prompted India to engage in similar operations, such as constructing roads and bridges in its vital locations along the border territory.

China's incursion into the Doklam region may be attributed to two primary goals: first, to gain access to the strategic Siliguri Corridor in India; and second, to engage in strategic maneuvering with Bhutan in order to keep the Doklam region under its control. Even Nevertheless, China has made certain concessions to Bhutan in its north-eastern area in an effort to establish bilateral diplomatic ties and settle border issues with Bhutan. If China is successful in settling the disagreement with Bhutan, it will extend an invitation to Bhutan to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which would provide vast infrastructure projects and support in developing the country.

China has territorial disputes and claims not only with “Bhutan and India, but also with other countries and territories, including: Japan (the two island conflicts in the 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”.

### **Conclusion**

As was just said, the Himalayan region is an essential component of India and has an important strategic position in the nation's foreign policy. “Since Modi's government took office in 2014, there has been a significant shift in the country's foreign policy toward encouraging socio-political cohesion in the Himalayan area”. This change came about as a direct result of the Modi administration.

As far as the situation on the ground is concerned, China still has the intention of exerting its influence in the area and will continue to pursue the forward strategy in order to increase both its political and military presence in the South Asian region.

The recent standoff that took place between India and China on June 15, 2020 in Galwan Valley suggests that conflict and competition between both countries are likely to occur at some point in



the future. In point of fact, India is fully aware of the presence of the Chinese in South Asia and the Himalayas; nevertheless, whatever has been done so far on the Indian side is inadequate in comparison to the initiative and offers made by the Chinese government to the less powerful countries in the Himalayan region.

Realistically speaking, there is no global authority that can stop China from becoming aggressive against other nations, including India. This is the situation that we are in. India's ability to deal with China without being frightened would benefit greatly from an increase in its military might. It is of the utmost importance for India to lessen its vulnerability in the Siliguri Corridor and in the Himalayan region by strengthening its infrastructure, military presence, and socio-political coherence in the area. Doing so would help India better defend itself against potential threats. If they did that, India would be able to better defend itself from any possible dangers.

Additionally, ever since the Wuhan COVID-19 Pandemic, there has been a great chance for the United States of America and India to collaborate against China. The capacity of India to build a balance of power against any possible hegemonic position held by China in the area would be facilitated by the construction of alliances with governments that have common interests both within the region and on a global scale. India's ability to do this would be aided by the establishment of alliances with countries that share shared interests both within the region and on a global scale. Such common ground is much ready for India to strengthen its alignment with Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries. This will eliminate the risk of any miscalculation occurring in the Indian Ocean, ensure freedom of navigation, and protect India's overall national and security interests in the region as well as in the Indo-Pacific.”

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