

# CHINA DEFENDS NEW VILLAGE IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Gen. Bipin Rawat at India's forward-most air-maintained post along the Subansiri valley in Arunachal on January 3. PTI-

China on Thursday said its construction of a village across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh was "beyond reproach" because it had "never recognised" Arunachal.

India's Ministry of External Affairs said earlier this week it was aware of the construction "along the LAC". This followed a report showing satellite images of the village, built between November 2019 and November 2020 and located a couple of kilometres across the LAC, beyond what India sees as the border separating Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, on the banks of the Tsari Chu river in Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal.

Indian officials said this area has been under Chinese control since 1959. There are close to two dozen spots along the entire length of the LAC in all sectors where India and China do not agree on its alignment. Indian officials said China had earlier built a permanent construction of military barracks in this area. The construction of the village has been seen by analysts as a move to bolster China's claim to the area, and part of a broader recent push by China to build civilian settlements in disputed frontier areas, which it has also done with Bhutan.

## 'Clear position'

The Chinese Foreign Ministry on Thursday said at a press briefing, to a question about the construction, that China's "position on Zangnan [or South Tibet, as China refers to Arunachal] region is consistent and clear". "We never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh," spokesperson Hua Chunying said. "China's development and construction activities within our own territory is normal. This is beyond reproach as it is in our territory."

The Communist Party-run *Global Times* newspaper, in a report earlier this week, said the area "has never been recognised by the Chinese government". "China and India haven't demarcated the border line of this area yet. So they cannot accuse China of building a village on the Indian side," Qian Feng, director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, was quoted as saying.

That is in large part because China has refused to exchange maps showing its LAC perception in the eastern sector, leaving unclear the extent of its claims on what is under its control.

Zhang Yongpan, a research fellow at the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), told the *Global Times* "there is no doubt that the Tsari Chu basin is an inherent part of China's territory".

The site of the village is close to where China had attacked an Assam Rifles post in 1959, in what is known as the Longju incident, said south India-based Tibet scholar Claude Arpi. He said it is at least 2 km south of the McMahon Line, which China doesn't recognise. After the 1962 war, India stopped patrolling the area.

Mr. Arpi said the construction appeared to be part of a programme by China to build what it calls

“poverty alleviation” villages. He estimates that under the initiative, launched after a Tibet economic work conference in 2015, some 600 villages have been built, of which around 100 are in border areas. “While the government calls them poverty alleviation villages, some of the villages in border areas are very remote with little economic activity there, so they appear to have a strategic purpose,” he said, adding that people had been moved to some of the new villages from other parts of Tibet, including families of herders, to occupy the newly built houses. Another village built last year, called Pangda, was built 2-3 km inside what Bhutan sees as its territory, in another disputed area.

The new village in Arunachal is around 30 km from another well-known border village called Yumai, which made headlines in China in 2017 when President Xi Jinping sent a letter to its residents saying he hoped they “will motivate more herders to set down roots in the border area like galsang flowers, and become guardians of Chinese territory”.

In 2015, the Chinese *National Geography* magazine reported that “the Tibetan family’s residence there had helped China maintain control of the territory”, said a report in the *South China Morning Post*. “Yumai would be occupied by India already if the family had decided to leave,” the village’s head was quoted as saying.

Mr. Arpi notes at the time of Mr. Xi’s letter, Yumai had around 30 residents. Today, he said, there are some 200 people living there.

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