**“How many miles make an inch?”**

Centre-State Relations and the 1967 India-Burma Boundary Agreement

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1. **Introduction**

‘The India-Myanmar boundary has been settled as per the provision of the India-Myanmar Boundary Agreement, 1967. However, ground demarcation work, including of nine unsettled Boundary Pillars along the India-Myanmar border in the Manipur sector, remains to be completed’, stated India’s Minister of Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju, in response to an August 2018 Parliamentary question on whether there are many unsettled boundary pillars (BP) along the border.[[1]](#endnote-1) The question came in context of protests in Manipur about the alleged incorrect positioning of the BPs. Terming the issue ‘very sensitive’, Rijiju asserted that there was no border dispute between India and Myanmar, and that the government was working towards finalising the BPs.[[2]](#endnote-2) The speaker of Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Parliament) echoed Rijiju’s point underlining that the issue was connected with India’s relations with Myanmar.[[3]](#endnote-3) If, as per Rijiju, there has not been any boundary dispute between India and Myanmar since 1967, then why were people in Manipur protesting against the re-positioning of a few BPs in 2018? Moreover, if a boundary agreement was signed in 1967, then why are nine BPs still unsettled? There is no answer to these questions in existing literature on Indian foreign policy, including the few works that focus on India’s relationship with Myanmar or the ‘Act East’ policy.[[4]](#endnote-4) The persistence of local protests on this issue and the lack of settlement of the few BPs make this an important issue. It highlights the impact of state-level politics on foreign policy decisions taken by the central government. A comment not just on India’s foreign policy decision-making but also on its federal state structure, this case allows to use the Indian case to operationalize the conceptualization of a state within the discipline of foreign policy analysis (FPA).

Based on fresh archival material, this article makes two arguments. First, the central government’s lack of consultation with state-level actors in the northeast before finalizing the 1967 boundary agreement with (as then called) Burma, provided the basis for such protests over BPs. Demarcated by the colonial authorities in the 19th century, the boundary between India and Myanmar had always been contested. Most communities in Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar viewed the border as an artificial line imposed by a colonial entity. What made this issue politically explosive in the 1960s and 1970s was the central government’s unilateral decision to accept and assert the colonial territorial construct as part of its postcolonial state-building endeavor. Not just in Manipur, protests were organized across Northeast against the agreement and the positioning of BPs. Lack of prior consultation with people in Northeast fed into the separatist discourse of a distant and oppressive entity trying to assert itself over an unaccepting populace. The impact of these protests was seen in the central government’s failure to convert the boundary agreement into a treaty. In fact, the decision to sign the agreement was made in such haste (due to the outbreak of the Mizo insurgency in 1966) that India was willing to make territorial concessions to Myanmar that did not require huge loss of cultivated and inhabited land. Though the need to make such concessions never arose, India did loose small tracts to Myanmar (a few square miles) in Manipur due to technical mistakes made by its delegation during the mapping phase (leading to differences within the Surveyor General’s team). This explains the lack of progress on the positioning of the nine BPs and the protests around the same till today. Feeding into a growing body of literature on the role of states in India’s foreign policy, this case study demonstrates that Northeastern states are not just passive recipients of the central governments’ foreign policy schemes. They actively seek to influence such decision-making and decision-implementation.

Second, India offers a valuable case study to address the unsettled debate within FPA on what constitutes a state. Is it a ‘metaphysical abstraction’ as argued by Hudson, or belongs to one of the three categories proffered by Aran and Alden i.e. the institutional state, the quasi-state, or the clustered state?[[5]](#endnote-5) The article argues that India of the 1960s and 70s cannot be boxed into either. A postcolonial entity striving for governance over a well-defined and uncontested territory and populace, India’s decision to formalize the boundary with Myanmar in 1967, without consulting local stakeholders, was part of its state-building process. Though of analytical value, Alden and Aran’s conceptualization of the state misses the element of dynamism when a state is developing its capabilities and legitimacy. The subsequent protests against the agreement only strengthened this state-building process. The central government succeeded in formalizing the boundary for most part, even if it failed to convert it to a boundary treaty. Reflecting state consolidation and confidence, India and Myanmar opened international entry-exit checkpoints at the Moreh-Tamu crossing between Manipur and Sagaing Divison and at the Rikhawdar-Zokhawthar crossing between Mizoram and Chin state in August 2018.[[6]](#endnote-6) Additionally, the state of India was anything but a metaphysical abstraction for both its agents, and the people of Northeast. Hudson’s conceptualization of the state overlooks the complexities of contract between the state and the citizen in postcolonial societies. Riddled with violent separatism, social diversity, and high levels of poverty, the state in India was a real entity: both as a nationalist binding plank for some, and an oppressive force for others. The study of Indian foreign policy thus helps enriching, if not settling, ongoing debates in FPA. As the introduction of this *special issue* argues, paucity of primary sources and lack of interest in FPA among Indian foreign policy scholars limit inquiry into India’s foreign policy decision-making and decision-implementation.[[7]](#endnote-7) This article brings these two strands together and shows how the study of Indian foreign policy and FPA could mutually benefit from the other, and how diplomatic history may play an enablers role therein. The rest of this article is divided into three sections. The first section offers an overview of the 1967 India-Burma Boundary Agreement, and details the FPA debates on statehood. The second section offers empirics of opposition over the boundary agreement, whereas the concluding section brings together the conceptual and empirical thread to re-articulate the key arguments of the article.

**2. Theoretical and Historical Context**

From a conventional viewpoint, a ‘state’ is a defined and delimited territory with a permanent population, under the authority of a government.[[8]](#endnote-8) Most IR theories, especially traditional canons such as realism and liberalism, emphasize the state as the most important unit of analysis.[[9]](#endnote-9) Constructivists challenge this idea by focusing on the ‘individual’, but see value in the role of states in influencing and being influenced by human collectives.[[10]](#endnote-10) Interaction between states, unsurprisingly, preoccupies much intellectual inquiry within IR. While the reasons for opening the so-called ‘black box’ of the state have been credibly, and sufficiently, argued in FPA, there is insufficient theorization of the state within FPA.[[11]](#endnote-11) Is it a sum total of or personified by its political leaders, or do different bureaucratic institutions constitute a state? Or, as Hudson argues, the state is simply a ‘metaphysical abstraction’ whose conceptual grounding lies in the domain of individual (and/or groups of) policymakers?[[12]](#endnote-12) FPA has traditionally treated the state more as an *arena* and not an *actor* i.e. the politics *within* a state takes precedence over other external and systemic factors.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Alden and Aran address this issue by conceptualizing three kinds of states i.e. the institutional state, the quasi-state, and the clustered state.[[14]](#endnote-14) An institutional state refers to (more or less) fully functional states such as those in Europe, that come close to the Weberian conception of the modern state. A quasi-state refers to ‘the states in the “global south”, represented by colonial territories in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Though these states enjoy legal recognition, they lack the capability to tax or enjoy monopoly over the means of violence. Such states ‘lack the institutions able to constrain and outlast the individuals occupying their offices’.[[16]](#endnote-16) The ‘clustered state’ is a value-based alliance of states such as the so-called ‘West’ that includes Europe, the US, and partly even Japan.[[17]](#endnote-17) Multilateral alliances such as NATO or economic bodies such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund are representative of clustered states.[[18]](#endnote-18) In terms of foreign policy, institutional states rely mostly on tools of modern diplomacy such as ambassadors, militaries, and other modern economic instruments including punitive measures such as sanctions. A clustered state uses similar instruments of foreign policymaking but often in a multilateral format. Quasi-states, however, are considered to rely more on societal linkages, personalities, and vision of their leaders, and relations between regimes and the international society. They may have all the markers of a modern state, however, the potential to conduct effective diplomacy mostly lies in hands of a select few individuals.[[19]](#endnote-19) The crucial difference between individuals formulating policy in an institutional state and a quasi-state is that political leaders are more constrained by institutional regulations in the former than they are likely to be in the latter.

Can India of 1960s and 1970s be categorized as one of these states or as a metaphysical abstraction? On the one hand, it inherited bureaucratic institutions that constitute a state (and the expertise to operate them) in most parts of its territory, and on the other hand, it continued to negotiate its role and expand its presence in the peripheries. State presence in most parts of modern India was akin to an institutional state. Yet, it was fragmented and contested in peripheries such as the Northeast. Even in the foreign policy domain, if the dominating role of individuals such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi compels one to identify India as a quasi-state, the endurance and expansion of its institutions, underlines the strength of the state. While a full discussion about the concept of postcolonial state is beyond the scope of this article, such critical distinctions about the nature of a state at different points in time has implications for FPA. It complicates Hudson’s argument that a state is a metaphysical abstraction because the ‘foundational ground’ of most social science inquiry relates to ‘how humans perceive and react to the world around them’.[[20]](#endnote-20) The colonial state was a real entity for those subjected to it, and which bound diverse communities within a political and legal fold – mostly by force. Equally, the postcolonial state was not just an aggregation of policymakers and institutions neatly tied by an abstract social contract with the population it serves and represents. It has been an evolving project, of which the nature, character, legitimacy, capacity, and sustainability fluctuate across time and space. As recent studies show, India’s state building in Northeast went beyond just a clutch of state agents operating in hostile social environments, and was both accepted and rejected in different ways.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In this context, the case of March 1967 India-Burma Boundary Agreement is telling. Despite the troubled relationship between New Delhi and Rangoon since the *junta’s* takeover in 1962, the two countries agreed to formalize their boundary in January 1967. It covered a 5-1/2 mile stretch between the Diphu Pass and the Talu Pass at the China tri-junction that was highly sensitive in light of the Sino-India border dispute and the 1962 war in which India lost to China. It was, however, the outbreak of the Mizo insurgency in 1966 alongside the ongoing Naga insurgency that triggered India to propose urgent formalization.[[22]](#endnote-22) Unhindered by the border, Naga and Mizo insurgents routinely crossed into Burma to seek shelter and local support.[[23]](#endnote-23) Demarcating administrative limits had become important for India in order to avoid transgression by its security forces, and to prevent the *Tatmadaw* soldiers from crossing into Indian Territory. The agreement also fed into the carving out of separate states within the Union (Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram were given statehood in 1970s and 1980s). Stakeholders in Assam and Nagaland (Manipur, and Mizoram did not exist as states in 1967) were not consulted once. Even when state-level involvement was suggested in 1974 by Survey of India officials, the MEA reiterated: ‘F.M. [foreign minister] directed that it is not necessary to obtain approval or enter into detailed discussion with State Governments on frontier questions which are central responsibility. We should keep them, however, informed.’[[24]](#endnote-24) Within days the proposal was made, and within weeks (an unusually quick time to create a boundary map) mapmakers from both sides agreed upon the boundary.[[25]](#endnote-25) Nonetheless, the agreement had implications for people on the ground. It was unlikely that any state-level government would have agreed to what India had on offer for Burma i.e. territorial concessions, however small and strategically inconsequential. Ceding territory was a deeply emotive issue for local populations who nursed historical grievances against Burma, and equally for other national-level leaders who felt humiliated by the 1962 defeat at China’s hand.

The decision to bypass local stakeholders was bureaucratically and political convenient if the boundary was ever to be formalized. Indira Gandhi offered the agreement as a *fait accompli* to disgruntled regional politicians instead of debating its merits. Economically weak but bureaucratically strong, India used an assortment of formal and informal diplomatic tools to secure the agreement and undertake the subsequent boundary demarcation process. As R Khathing, head of the Indian team in the joint boundary commission reminded his Burmese counterparts in 1973, the demarcation was being done to ‘avoid any future confusion or misunderstanding of territorial jurisdiction’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Official channels were used to negotiate the agreement. If Nehru’s aversion to Ne Win and his politics (for ousting U Nu in a military coup) limited bilateral ties, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi’s pragmatism promised normalization. Indian officials stressed upon warm interpersonal relations between Ne Win and Gandhi. This mix of modern diplomacy (usually accredited to an institutional state) and reliance on interpersonal ties (often a characteristic of a quasi-state associated with the global south) allows moving beyond existing conceptualizations of the state in FPA.[[27]](#endnote-27) They miss the fact that states are dynamic entities not uniform in their extraction and assertion potential across time and space. The next section details how regional pushback against boundary demarcation complicated a foreign policy decision during its implementation phase.[[28]](#endnote-28)

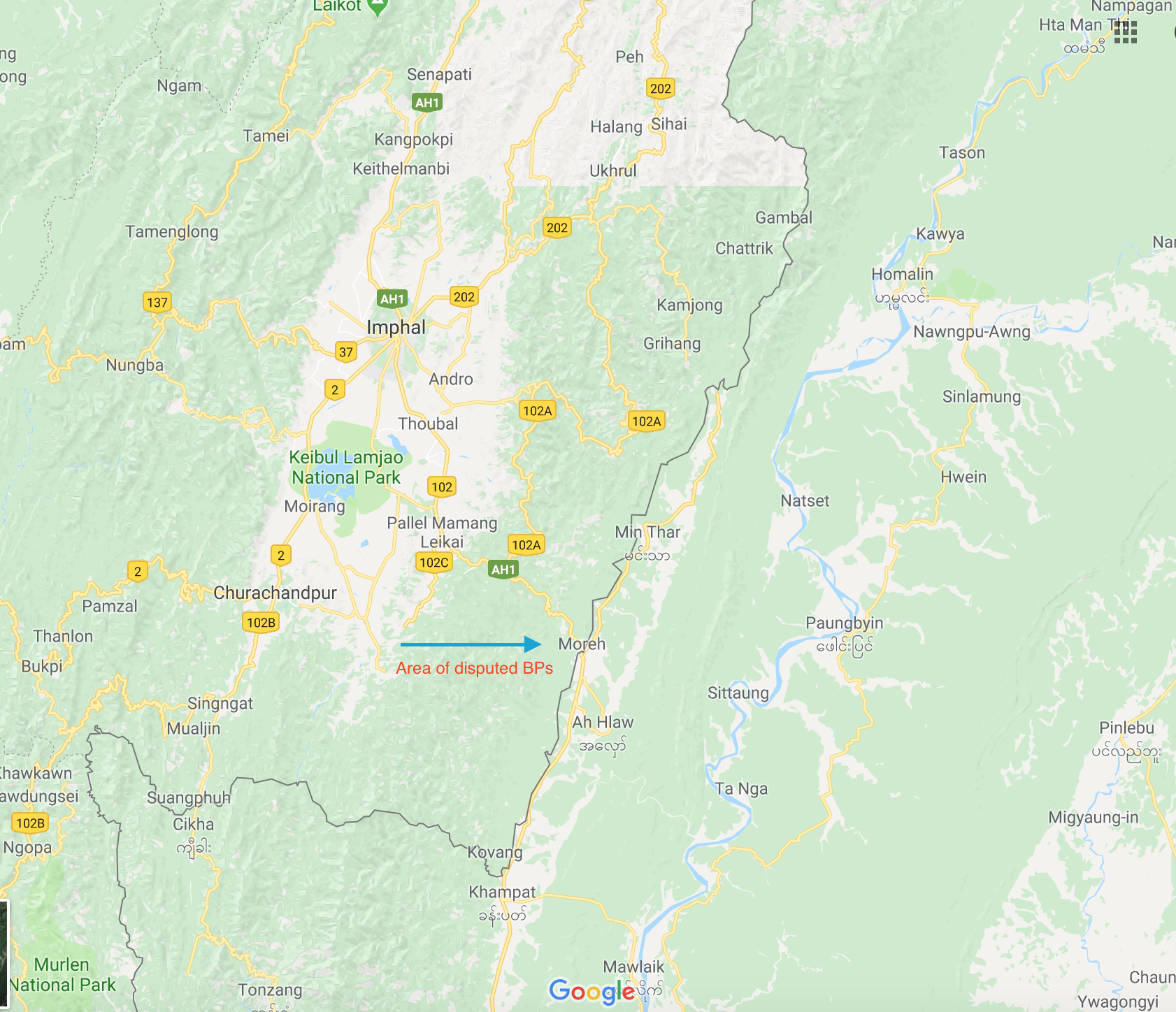
**3. “How many miles make an inch?”**[[29]](#endnote-29)

On June 13, 1967, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Surinder Pal Singh stated: “the Agreement [was] only the first step. The Joint Boundary Commission to be appointed by the two Governments will proceed to have the boundary demarcated on the ground. The Commission will also prepare the draft of a Boundary Treaty to be signed by India and Burma. That will be the final act in the friendship to transform this traditional border between the two friendly neighbouring countries into a fully delineated and demarcated boundary.[[30]](#endnote-30) Such a treaty never came about. A process that was expected to complete within a few years was left incomplete by mid-1970s. In October-April 1968-69, 240 miles of the southern sector were demarcated on the ground. Another 250 miles were demarcated in 1969-70, where a dispute arose between the two sides over a 20-mile stretch involving seven boundary pillars in Manipur (BPs 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 21, and 23).[[31]](#endnote-31) Both sides had different interpretations of where the pillars should be positioned. Whereas the Indian side wanted the boundary to be demarcated in this area along the pillars already existing on the ground since 1896, the Burmese side insisted on re-siting them as per the ½” map agreed in 1967. This variation between the ground position and the map position, India maintained, was a technical inaccuracy. Accepting the Burmese claim would lead to loss of cultivated and inhabited territory.[[32]](#endnote-32) Shifting of BPs 21 and 23, in fact, meant losing substantial parts of the border town of Moreh. Not surprisingly, Manipur’s state leadership began pressuring the central government on this issue. Nonetheless, demarcation of other areas went ahead as planned. In 1970-71, 225 miles were demarcated, followed by another 120 miles in 1971-72, right up to the Diphu Pass. The disputed 5½ miles north of Diphu Pass were left un-demarcated.[[33]](#endnote-33) Of the total 906 miles of the border, a total of 835 miles were demarcated.[[34]](#endnote-34) Dispute over the rest 71 miles was left un-resolved. Signed without consulting domestic (and external) stakeholders the agreement opened the floodgates for political and bureaucratic disagreement.

Internationally, China objected the agreement and put pressure on the Burmese regarding the same. Bilaterally, the joint boundary commission faced a variety of problems related to the location of a range of BPs. At the national level, parliamentarians challenged the government’s stand on the tri-junction with China. Locally, representatives from Northeast raised objections about the boundary alignment. Bureaucratically, differences over the demarcation emerged within the Indian team over the ‘technical inaccuracy’ related to the 1967 map. Indian surveyors had mistakenly accepted alignments in the sector that ran against Indian interests as the country stood to lose territory. What was expected to be a straightforward exercise once the *tricky* objective of convincing the Burmese *junta* was achieved, became *trickier*. Soon after Singh laid the statement in the parliament, he vacated the floor for Chagla to ‘take questions’ on the issue. Hem Barua, a prominent Assamese poet and parliamentarian, challenged that in 1961 Burma had assured India of revising the ‘provisional agreement’ over the tri-junction with China once an agreement was reached with India (this was not the case in fact).[[35]](#endnote-35) Rangoon’s ‘neutrality’, and India’s ready acceptance of the same, meant that ‘we [India] are sacrificing our land’.[[36]](#endnote-36) When Chagla responded with the classic quip (‘we are not sacrificing an inch of our land’), Barua’s riposte was sharp: ‘how many miles make an inch?’ D C Sharma, another parliamentarian from Gurdaspur in Punjab added that this agreement about which India ‘was making so much song’ is not going to work for the country’s good, because India’s border problems with both China and Pakistan were unresolved.[[37]](#endnote-37) G G Swell, a parliamentarian from the then ‘Autonomous Districts’ (now Meghalaya), pressed Chagla whether he had taken into account the ‘desire’ of Naga people living on both sides of border to become part of India, and raised it with the Burmese? Though the answer to this was a ‘no’, the question itself was a portent to the kind of challenges the central government was to face in coming years.[[38]](#endnote-38)

*3.1 Net Loss*

By 1970 it was clear to the Indian delegation that the disputed sector in Manipur required diplomatic intervention if the issue was to be resolved. Though this problem had not halted progress in other sectors, the Burmese took a tough stand that if they accept India’s interpretation of the BPs (6 to 10 and 21, 23) and end up losing territory in that sector, they would like to be compensated in equal ‘territorial’ measures somewhere else within that sector. To accommodate Burma, in November 1970, India offered to (i) shift BP 33, which was in the same sector, to the west of village Tuipang (essentially handing over the village to Burma); and (ii) shift the mutually accepted and demarcated BP 34 about 200 yards southwards so that Burma gained access to a road that connected various villages in that area. The only condition was that Burma does not demand any change in BPs 6-10, 21, and 23. The new boundary alignment near BPs 33 and 34 would accommodate Burma to the extent of 0.7 sq. miles for the loss of about 2.3 sq. miles incurred by them in the sectors from BPs 6 to 10, 21 and 23.[[39]](#endnote-39) Burma, not surprisingly, rebuffed the offer. They wanted to re-site BPs 33 and 34 by about a mile further west of the position suggested by India, for only such a re-alignment could be ‘fair’. Such realignment, however, transferred another village named Bongmal Thampak (in addition to Tuipang), where a number of ‘new hutments’ had been established recently. Such a transfer, India argued, could lead to ‘adverse public reaction’.[[40]](#endnote-40) New Delhi was not impressed. In a secret letter dated June 20, 1974, Colonel Y L Khullar, Director of the North-Eastern Circle, a desk within the Survey of India, informed the MEA that ‘calculations from freshly prepared charts reveal a net loss of 1.4 sq. miles (approximately) between B.Ps 1 to 39 if the demarcation had been based solely on the ½-inch map positions of B.Ps’.[[41]](#endnote-41) A similar message was reiterated by Khullar’s successor Colonel S Choudhuri in a ‘top secret’ document dated March 27, 1972, in reply to another ‘top secret’ letter by the MEA.[[42]](#endnote-42)



Map 1: Manipur-Myanmar Border[[43]](#endnote-43)

In December 1972, a senior Indian official visited the sites of the various disputed BPs in Manipur and found that apart from one Choro Khunao village, no other habitation existed near pillars 6-10 but the hutments near BPs 33 and 34 were indeed extensive.[[44]](#endnote-44) On this basis, the official argued that with the foreign minister’s permission, India could make two counter-proposals. First, pillars 6, 9, 10, 21, and 23 remain undisturbed on their positions as found on the ground. However, given the lack of habitation nearby, BPs 7 and 8 could be re-sited further west as per the coordinates on the ½” map attached to the boundary agreement. This new alignment could accommodate Burma to the fullest extent of the territory lost (around 2.32 sq. miles in this case). BP 33 would be located as per the ½” map which would keep Tuipang village inside India. This proposal was to be offered first, for it only compensated Burma in terms of the quantity of territory lost, but not in terms of the quality of territory lost. If Burma were to raise issues about being re-compensated both quantitatively and qualitatively, then India could offer something else. The second proposal would require BPs 6, 9, 10, 21, and 23 to remain undisturbed, whereas BPs 7 and 8 would be re-sited as per the ½” map attached to the agreement (on the left bank of the Yu river that flows in that sector), and BP 33 will be located west of Tuipang. Such demarcation will lead to Burma losing 0.43 sq. miles in one area, but gaining 0.81 sq. miles in another, and was likely to be ‘acceptable’ to the other side. Though India would incur a net loss of 0.38 sq. miles, it will not be in ‘sensitive’ areas near BPs 6, 9, 10, and more importantly, BPs 21 and 23.[[45]](#endnote-45) There is no evidence whether such proposals were indeed made to Burma, and how the other side reacted. It is clear that despite claims in the parliament about not losing territory to China or Burma, the Indian government was actively thinking of solutions to accommodate Burma.

Differences over this issue surfaced within the Indian team by 1974. The North-Eastern Circle officials disagreed with both the MEA and the S-G on the boundary alignment in Manipur. In a secret letter to senior diplomat J C Ajmani, the then Director of the North-Eastern Circle, Colonel M M Datta complained that he was deliberately being kept out of the delegation. Why? Because he highlighted that India would lose nearly 1.58 sq. miles by accepting the ground positions of 31 BPs ranging from 1 to 5, 11 to 20, 22, 24 to 32, and 34 to 39. This was in addition to the expected loss in the above-mentioned areas where India was willing to lose Tuipang. Such an assessment was based on his ‘informal’ meeting with Ajmani, S N Rao, Director of MEA Historical Division, and K K Chopra, a law officer, at the international lounge of Calcutta’s Dum Dum airport on October 01, 1974.[[46]](#endnote-46) He claimed that the four officials ‘agreed’ that India should not lose 2.60 sq miles due to previous technical errors i.e. India had shown the wrong alignment in the ½” map attached to the 1967 agreement. India was losing territory by accepting the ground positions of the 31 BPs under consideration, and then losing more territory by accepting the ½” map positions of BPs 6-10, 21, and 23. Losing territory ‘twice’ was deemed unacceptable, and the S-G was duly informed about this development on October 2, 1974.[[47]](#endnote-47) Not only did Datta cite his conversation with Ajmani and Rao to buttress his point, but also referenced that his predecessors had communicated these area figures to the MEA in 1970 and 1972 – without avail. His final grouse was related to the government’s non-inclusion of state-level representatives in boundary deliberations. Before the Survey of India had taken over the boundary demarcation, he argued, it was the state survey organizations that formulated border maps. According to him, given the federal nature of the republic, the states must have a voice in boundary deliberations.[[48]](#endnote-48) By this point in time, various state leaders were asking questions about the boundary.

Was Datta correct in highlighting the loss of territory, or was he deliberately misleading the negotiations in cohort with state-level interests and institutional rivalry with the MEA? Rao’s reply to Datta’s letter indicates the former. Rao accepted that a meeting at the Calcutta airport did take place, but did not recollect a ‘detailed discussion’ on the issue.[[49]](#endnote-49) He claimed that the first serious meeting on the topic occurred in Rangoon at the Indian embassy where Datta, allegedly, handed an unsigned note with area figures to the Surveyor General. This act ‘annoyed’ the S-G, who expected Datta to disclose such sensitive information in private. Apparently, Rao asserted that Datta had open differences with both the S-G and the deputy S-G on the boundary issue.[[50]](#endnote-50) As for Datta’s request to involve state-level representatives, Rao stated that the foreign minister had directed that it was not necessary to ‘obtain approval of or consult’ the state-level leadership on boundary issues.[[51]](#endnote-51) The issue was never fully resolved, and the planned boundary treaty never materialized. Of note here is the point that despite losing territory to China being the bigger worry, it was Burma to whom India ended up losing territory. This occurred not because India was unwilling to cede ground – which it was – but due to mapping inaccuracies at the time of signing the boundary agreement. Admission of such technical errors and political desire to accommodate Burmese demands would have led to an outcry against the government regardless of how small and strategically inconsequential the net loss in territory was. As the next subsection shows, despite such upheaval within, the central government continued to maintain that India had not lost ‘an inch’ of territory to any country, and that the agreement was simply a formalization of a ‘traditional boundary’.

*3.2 Domestic Discontent*

Exclusion of states in the demarcation process smoothened the negotiations between Burma and India. But it did not assuage domestic concerns about loss of territory. This lack of consultation between center and state created problems for state-level leaders who were under pressure from their constituents to influence the demarcation process. Whether it was a Manipuri advocate complaining about the loss of Kabaw Valley to the Attorney General of India,[[52]](#endnote-52) or the president of a nationalist Manipuri outfit demanding the same from the foreign minister, the government employed a standard response i.e. India needs to respect the agreement, which formalizes a traditional boundary. [[53]](#endnote-53) Grievances aired by members of the Naga elite (from outside the separatist fold) demanding re-demarcation in a way that all Naga villages lay within India were met with similar injunctions.[[54]](#endnote-54) In 1968, the chief minister of Nagaland T N Angami warned Indira Gandhi that he had received many representatives from the local public who were opposed to the erection of permanent boundary pillars because, ‘(i) many Naga villagers living on Indian side had their field on the other side, (ii) in some cases a portion of a village fell on Indian side and the other portion on the Burmese side, (iii) the Chiefs who were entitled to certain customary tributes either in form of cash or in kind, or even in the form of a free labour, lived on Indian side, but his subjects lived on the Burmese side’.[[55]](#endnote-55)Gandhi’s response to Angami was along expected lines i.e. the agreement ‘merely formalised the traditional boundary delineated on the maps’ and had little impact on the ground.[[56]](#endnote-56) But Angami was far from reassured, and promised that‘if the Government of India were to give away any portion of the land belonging to the Nagas on our side to Burma then the situation would become moredisturbing on this important international border’.[[57]](#endnote-57)When Angami’s successor, H Sema raised a similar issue in March 1971 and sought to re-open boundary negotiations, Gandhi asserted the border’s lack of impact on livelihoods of the local people and India’s commitment to Burma to reject Sema’s demand.[[58]](#endnote-58) In Manipur, members of the Manipur Youth League held a demonstration on May 01, 1970 and burnt effigies of Jawaharlal Nehru, triggering a special parliamentary session on the issue two days later.[[59]](#endnote-59) When the government tried explaining India’s ‘difference of opinion’ with Burma on Moreh, Bhandari sharply retorted: ‘so does the territory south of Moreh town, not belong to India? … you are making this question too light despite the sensitivity of this issue’.[[60]](#endnote-60) The government tried outlining the technical difficulties that the Indian delegation was facing in order to clarify the situation, but it only made things worse. As the parliament became a shouting ground, the opposition blamed the government for willfully ceding territory, and the government blamed the opposition for ‘deliberately misunderstanding’ the situation.[[61]](#endnote-61)

By not taking various domestic stakeholders into confidence prior to the boundary demarcation, the government had risked and eventually did face severe political pushback. Questions over loss of territory became routine both in the parliament as well as in the media. In May 1972, the government again faced allegations that the boundary in Nagaland had led to the loss of 50 villages.[[62]](#endnote-62) Asserting that such information was incorrect became pointless, as few believed the claim even if it was true. Failure to consult or adequately inform the state governments about the intent behind the 1967 agreement and the subsequent demarcation process gave space to separatist partisans to stoke underlying social and territorial anxieties. The boundary agreement became a political plank on which separatist groups violently criticized India on the one hand, and began pressuring local chief ministers and other state officials on the other hand. Even Mizoram, which had witnessed the outburst of an insurgency since 1966, was not far behind Manipur and Nagaland to object the boundary. In early 1973, the Mizos alleged that prior to the 1971 demarcation phase, the boundary in that sector ran along the Kharia Range and then along the Raphu Va stream until it joined the River Kolodyne (now called Kaladan).[[63]](#endnote-63) Ever since the demarcation this alignment had been shifted from Raphu Va stream to the Vawpaw stream, a loss of 150 acres was incurred. As a result, villagers from the Chapui village in this area lost their agricultural land and are in danger of losing their livelihoods. The MEA responded that this was not the case, as India had formalized a traditional boundary, and that the villagers in Chapui must have ‘mistaken a triangulation stone erected during the Survey operations in the 1930s as a boundary stone’.[[64]](#endnote-64) Instead for taking the villagers concerns on board, the government put the blame on them for misinterpreting the boundary.

**Conclusion**

Rijiju’s statement in 2018 was not much different from those made by Indira Gandhi in the 1960s. The boundary was settled between India and Myanmar, even if a few BPs required adjustment. The strengthening of ties between New Delhi and northeastern states over the decades has even ameliorated the salience of the boundary issue at the state governmental level, even if it remains politically potent among the public.[[65]](#endnote-65) At the outset, this article raised two questions: One, if there is no boundary dispute between India and Myanmar, then why did people in Manipur protest against the re-positioning of a few BPs? Two, if a boundary agreement was signed in 1967, then why are nine BPs still unsettled? The answer to these questions remains that the central government did not take local stakeholders into confidence during the decision-making phase, made technical errors during the mapping phase, and faced local protests ever since. However, in addition to these empirical answers, this case study has important conceptual implications. It shows that India offers a valuable case study to address an unsettled debate within FPA on what constitutes the state. FPA still draws heavily on Western case studies.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Analysis of the decision-implementation phase complicates in equal measure Hudson’s contention that the state is a ‘metaphysical abstraction’, and Alden and Aran’s conceptualization of the state as ‘institutional’, ‘quasi’, or ‘clustered’. The state of India in mid-1960s was a real, and an often oppressive, entity for many people in the Northeast. In other regions, however, the social and class diversity made the state a ‘binding’ plank in India’s national development. The social contract between the state and the citizen, as one sees in developed nation-states, was an evolving one in India’s case (it still is in some parts of the country), and abidance to the rule of law was far from uniform. In such an instance, where the state itself becomes a driver of national identity, terming it an abstraction is inaccurate. Formalizing the boundary with Myanmar, from an Indian perspective, was not just a foreign policy decision (even if it was treated as one), but equally a domestic decision wherein the state intended to extend its administration to previously ungoverned spaces.

Col. Datta’s ‘frantic letters’, as Rao termed them, had little impact.[[67]](#endnote-67) Gandhi’s decision to not consult regional stakeholders prior to signing the agreement was a constitutionally acceptable tactical move. Determined on extending its administrative power to hitherto ungoverned regions, the central government did not budge during the demarcation phase, despite strong opposition in the parliament and on the ground. Instead, it continued to assert that India was not losing any territory either to China or to Myanmar. The few square miles that were lost in Manipur were portrayed as compromises common in such negotiations. Boundary delineation was necessary to ensure provision of goods and services to its citizens on the periphery. Disaggregated in its presence and distribution potential, India displayed the traits of both an institutional state as well as a quasi-state. It was institutional because it had all the markers and capacities for being one i.e. a functioning parliamentary democracy with specified bureaucratic procedures of decision-making. The state’s existence or longevity did not depend on one ethnic group or select few elites. Yet, in the Northeast, it was more like a quasi-state struggling to develop and assert itself.

Ironically, for a state that wanted to offer itself as a viable alternative to people in the Northeast, such lack of consultation ended up increasing suspicion about India’s intent among regional populace. The Indian state came to be viewed as one that was willing to compromise Manipuri, Naga, or Mizo territory to the Burmese. This was a cost that the central government was willing to pay, for it calculated that such discontent would be short-lived. Though Northeast India is still a hotbed of separatist insurgencies and organized crime, the salience of the boundary issue has subsided – even though the issue is far from being settled, as the recent protests suggest. For any government, including the currently dominant and ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, limiting the political salience of the boundary question is critical. Not only can the issue add to the already tense security situation on the ground inside India (as it did in the 1960s and 70s), but also complicate India’s relations with Myanmar if the sanctity of the agreed boundary is not maintained. The centrality of Myanmar in India’s ‘Act East’ policy and the need for economic development in northeast means that New Delhi will have to continue finding ways to balance local politics with foreign policy goals if it seeks to avoid a sharp confrontation between the two in the future. Therefore, this case of foreign policymaking by a post-colonial state struggling to assert its authority on an unaccepting populace in its domestic periphery, and desiring to formalize its sovereign limits in a region marred by international (and domestic) territorial disputes, is of immense value to reconsider existing FPA concepts.

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   https://mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2018-pdfs/rs-01082018-English/157.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ‘No border dispute between India and Myanmar, states government’, *Economic Times*, 01/08/2018: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/no-border-dispute-between-india-and-myanmar-states-government/articleshow/65229882.cms?utm\_source=facebook.com&utm\_medium=Social&utm\_campaign=ETFBMain [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Atul Sharma and Saswati Choudhury eds. *Mainstreaming the Northeast in India’s Look and Act East Policy* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Gurudas Das and C Joshua Thomas eds. *Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India’s Northeast* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Chietigj Bajpaee, ‘Dephasing India’s Look East/Act East Policy’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 39 (2), August 2017; Isabelle Saint-Mezard, ‘India’s Act East policy: Strategic Implications for the Indian Ocean’*, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 12 (2), October 2016, 177-190 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Chris Alden and Amnon Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) 9-10 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘International entry-exit checkpoints opened between India-Myanmar’, *Business Standard*, 08/08/2018:

   https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/int-l-entry-exit-checkpoints-opened-between-india-myanmar-118080800272\_1.html [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sumit Ganguly and Manjeet Pardesi. ‘Foreign Policy Analysis and India’, in Klaus Brummer and Valerie M Hudson eds., *Foreign Policy Analysis Beyond North America* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015) 57-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Jackson, *Sovereignty: The Evolution of an Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) 5-6 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014) 15-39 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 69-71 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Alden and Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 9-10; Valerie M Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007) 4-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3-4 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Alden and Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 10-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Alden and Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 62-77 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid 67; They refer to Robert Jackson’s work on quasi-state to build their case. See Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jackson, *Quasi-States, 21-22* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Alden and Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 70-71 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid 71 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid 72-73 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3-4 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Berenice-Guyot Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China, and the Himalayas, 1910-1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Avinash Paliwal, ‘“A Cat’s Paw of Indian Reactionaries?” – Strategic Rivalry and Domestic Politics at the India-China-Myanmar Tri-junction’, *Asian Security*, December 2018. For Burma, this was an opportune moment to mend ties with New Delhi, when its relations with China were at their lowest ebb. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Ajmani, 10/12/1974, NAI. External affairs come under in the ‘Union List’ of the Constitution of India, and did not require clearance from state-governments. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Paliwal, ‘A Cat’s Paw of Indian Reactionaries?”’ [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, UNCLASSIFIED, ‘Minutes of the 14th Meeting of the India-Burma Joint Boundary Commission held in New Delhi on 12-13/11/1973’, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Siba Grovogui, ‘Postcoloniality in Global South Foreign Policy: A Perspective’, in Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner ed. *The Foreign Policies of the Global South: Rethinking Conceptual Frameworks* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003) 31 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. It is important here to note that the line dividing domestic and foreign policy issues becomes extremely divided on this issue of boundary demarcation. The Ministry of External Affairs administered Nagaland till 1972 when responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs. As explained by James Rosenau, most such decisions are made along the “domestic-foreign frontier”, and cannot be explained by excluding one level of analysis from the other, or even privileging one over the other. James Rosenau, *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 3-24 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Deputy Director S Narayana Rao to J S (NE) A F Gonsalvez, 09/01/1975, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. RSD, 82nd Session, ‘Delineation of Indo-Burma Border’, *Rajya Sabha Questions*, Un-starred Question 815, 24/11/1972 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Gonsalvez, 09/01/1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. 4th LSD, 2nd Session, ‘Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement’, 13/06/1967 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Deputy Secretary M K Khisha to Director (NE) MHA S Loveraj, 05/02/1973, S/551/8/73, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Referenced in Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Gonsalvez, 09/01/1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Google Maps: Markings made by author. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Khisha to Loveraj, 05/02/1973 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. North Eastern Circle Office, Director, Colonel M M Datta to J C Ajmani, JS (South), MEA, SECRET, 18/11/1974, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Ajmani, 10/12/1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Deputy Director S Narayana Rao to DS (South) 01/12/ 1973, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Deputy Director S Narayana Rao to A Tripathi, Under Secretary (BC), 07/07/1974, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Historical Division, MEA, ‘The question of Naga traditional rights – a review of discussions with the governments of Nagaland and Burma’, 11/10/1976, EA HI/102/36/76, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Tripathi, 07/07/1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. RSD, ‘Calling Attention: Reported Fixing of New Boundary Pillars by the Burmese Government About Two Furlongs Inside the Indian Territory in the Behend Area of Churchandpur Sub-Division of Manipur’, 13/05/1970, 128-151 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid, 132 [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. RSD, ‘Indo-Burma Border, 12/05/1972, 25-26 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Deputy Director S Narayana Rao to J S (South), 02/04/1973, NAI [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. For a detailed take on the evolution of the politics of northeast India see Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers No More: New Narratives From India’s Northeast* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2018); GoI, ‘Official Spokesperson’s response to reports regarding alleged shifting of boundary pillars on India-Myanmar border’, *MEA*, 08/07/2018:

    https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/30038/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+reports+regarding+alleged+shifting+of+boundary+pillars+on+IndiaMyanmar+border [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Pinar Bilgin and L H M Ling eds., *Asia in International Relations: Unlearning Imperial Power Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) 1-10. There has been a spurt of articles using Turkey and China as case studies, particularly in the *Foreign Policy Analysis* journal. Yet, these articles are outliers rather than norms. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Historical Division, R&I, MEA, SECRET, Rao to Ajmani, 10/12/1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)