iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 14 **Issue:** IV **Month of publication:** April 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2026.81082

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 14 Issue IV Apr 2026- Available at www.ijraset.com

The China-Arunachal Pradesh Dispute: Navigating the Geopolitics of Fear, Desire, and Security in the Himalayas

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Abstract: ***The China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute represents one of the most enduring and complex territorial conflicts in contemporary geopolitics. While its origins lie in colonial-era boundary demarcations, particularly the McMahon Line, the dispute has evolved into a multidimensional contest shaped by strategic rivalry, ideological narratives, ecological concerns, and technological transformations. This article argues that the conflict has transcended its territorial origins and now reflects a broader systemic rivalry characterized by layered securitization. By examining cartographic aggression, civilizational legitimacy rooted in Tibet and Tawang, infrastructural militarization in the Himalayan frontier, hydropolitical tensions surrounding the Brahmaputra River, and the increasing role of surveillance and digital technologies, the study highlights the depth and persistence of the dispute. It concludes that Arunachal Pradesh has emerged as a critical geopolitical node in Asia, where competing visions of sovereignty, identity, and regional order intersect, making resolution both urgent and highly complex (MEA, 2026; Chellaney, 2025; CSIS, 2026).***

I. INTRODUCTION: THE HIMALAYAN STALEMATE

The Sino-Indian boundary dispute has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, evolving into what can be described as a "dynamic stalemate." This condition is characterized by sustained military tension without escalation into full-scale war, reflecting both restraint and deep-seated mistrust between the two nuclear-armed states. The events following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash marked a turning point, shifting bilateral relations from cautious engagement to a more adversarial posture defined by strategic competition and military preparedness.

While earlier phases of the conflict were concentrated in the western sector, particularly Ladakh, recent developments indicate a significant shift toward the eastern sector, where Arunachal Pradesh has emerged as a focal point of geopolitical contestation. This region, spanning over 83,000 square kilometers, holds immense strategic significance due to its location at the intersection of India, China, Bhutan, and Myanmar. It serves as India's gateway to the Northeast and plays a crucial role in maintaining territorial continuity and national security.

However, the importance of Arunachal Pradesh extends beyond its geographic position. For India, it is an integral state with political, cultural, and administrative integration into the national framework. For China, it is framed as "South Tibet," thereby embedding the dispute within a broader narrative of historical and civilizational claims. This divergence in perception has transformed the dispute into more than a boundary disagreement; it is now a contest over legitimacy, identity, and strategic influence. As a result, even routine administrative measures, such as infrastructure development or naming practices, are interpreted through a securitized lens, intensifying tensions and reinforcing a cycle of mutual suspicion (MEA, 2026).

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE DISPUTE

The origins of the China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute can be traced back to the colonial period, particularly the 1914 Simla Convention, where the McMahon Line was proposed as the boundary between British India and Tibet. While British India accepted the line, China rejected it, arguing that Tibet lacked the authority to sign international agreements independently. This foundational disagreement laid the groundwork for future contestation.

Following India's independence in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the dispute intensified as both nations sought to consolidate their territorial claims. The 1962 Sino-Indian War marked a significant escalation, with Chinese forces advancing into Arunachal Pradesh before eventually withdrawing. Although the war ended decades ago, it left a legacy of mistrust that continues to shape bilateral relations.

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In the decades that followed, both countries engaged in diplomatic efforts to manage the dispute, including confidence-building measures and border agreements aimed at maintaining peace. However, the absence of a definitive settlement has ensured that the dispute remains unresolved. In recent years, the focus has shifted from managing the conflict to actively asserting claims, reflecting a broader shift toward strategic competition.

III. THE CARTOGRAPHIC WAR: NARRATIVE, LAW, AND POWER

In contemporary geopolitics, the map has emerged as a powerful instrument of statecraft. The China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute illustrates how cartography can be used to construct and reinforce territorial claims. China's strategy of systematically renaming locations within Arunachal Pradesh represents a deliberate effort to reshape both domestic and international perceptions of the region.

These actions are grounded in China's 2022 Land Border Law, which emphasizes the strengthening of border governance and the assertion of sovereignty. By issuing standardized Chinese names for geographical features, Beijing seeks to create a documentary and linguistic record that supports its claims. This process, often described as "Toponymic Colonialism," reflects a broader strategy of symbolic annexation, where control over language precedes control over territory (Hindustan Times, 2026).

The cartographic dimension of the dispute is further reinforced by China's "Three Warfares" strategy, which integrates psychological, media, and legal warfare. Through this approach, China aims to shape narratives, influence international opinion, and legitimize its claims without resorting to direct military confrontation. The repeated issuance of maps and official statements contributes to a gradual normalization of its position, embedding the idea of "South Tibet" within global discourse.

India has responded by firmly rejecting these claims and reaffirming its sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh. However, the persistence of China's cartographic initiatives highlights the asymmetry in narrative strategies, where long-term perception management plays a crucial role. This ongoing "cartographic war" underscores the importance of narrative sovereignty in modern geopolitics, where the battle for territory is fought not only on the ground but also in the realms of law, language, and perception (Chellaney, 2025).

IV. TAWANG, TIBET, AND THE POLITICS OF CIVILIZATIONAL DESIRE

The dispute over Arunachal Pradesh cannot be fully understood without examining the deeper layer of civilizational and religious significance associated with Tibet and the region of Tawang. Unlike conventional territorial conflicts driven solely by strategic considerations, this dispute is deeply intertwined with issues of identity, legitimacy, and historical memory.

Tawang occupies a central place in Tibetan Buddhism as the birthplace of the Sixth Dalai Lama and as the location of one of the largest monasteries in the region. Its significance extends beyond religious symbolism, serving as a vital link in the spiritual and cultural network of Tibetan Buddhism. For China, the consolidation of Tibet remains incomplete as long as regions with strong cultural ties to Tibetan identity remain outside its control.

This dynamic is further complicated by the question of the Dalai Lama's succession. The Chinese government has asserted its authority over the process of reincarnation, seeking to control the selection of the next Dalai Lama. However, the current Dalai Lama has indicated that his successor would be born in a "free society," potentially outside Chinese jurisdiction. This creates the possibility of competing claims to religious authority, with Tawang emerging as a potential center for an alternative lineage.

In this context, the dispute over Tawang takes on a broader significance, transforming into a contest over spiritual legitimacy and ideological control. It reflects what can be described as the geopolitics of desire, where territorial claims are driven not only by strategic interests but also by the need to assert dominance over cultural and religious narratives (CSIS, 2026).

V. INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE MILITARIZATION OF THE HIMALAYAS

The transformation of the Himalayan frontier through infrastructure development has significantly altered the strategic dynamics of the dispute. Traditionally viewed as a natural barrier, the Himalayas are increasingly becoming an accessible and contested space shaped by roads, tunnels, and military installations.

India's investment in infrastructure, including the development of all-weather roads and tunnels, has enhanced its ability to maintain a sustained presence in forward areas. These developments have improved logistical capabilities, enabling rapid troop deployment and strengthening defensive preparedness. At the same time, China has undertaken extensive infrastructure projects on the Tibetan plateau, including highways, railways, and dual-use villages that serve both civilian and military purposes.

This parallel expansion has intensified the security dilemma, where each side perceives the other's actions as a threat. The result is a cycle of militarization that increases the risk of confrontation. Infrastructure, once associated with economic development, has thus become a critical component of military strategy, blurring the distinction between civilian and defense domains.

VI. HYDROPOLITICS AND THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

The strategic importance of Arunachal Pradesh is further amplified by its role in the Brahmaputra River basin. Originating in Tibet and flowing into India, the river is a vital resource for millions of people, supporting agriculture, energy production, and ecological systems.

China's upstream position provides it with significant leverage, allowing it to construct dams and regulate water flow. While these projects are often presented as developmental initiatives, they have potential implications for downstream regions, raising concerns about water security and environmental sustainability. The possibility of water diversion or flow manipulation introduces a new dimension to the dispute, transforming it into a contest over resource control (Chellaney, 2025).

For India, the Brahmaputra is essential for the economic and ecological stability of the Northeast. Any disruption could have far-reaching consequences, including agricultural losses and social instability. As a result, water has emerged as a critical factor in the broader geopolitical equation, reinforcing the importance of Arunachal Pradesh.

VII. TECHNOLOGY, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF CONFLICT

The integration of advanced technologies into military strategy has fundamentally transformed the nature of the China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute, shifting it from a primarily terrain-bound contest to one increasingly mediated by data, algorithms, and real-time intelligence systems. In the past, the harsh geography of the Himalayas imposed natural limits on surveillance and military mobility, creating zones of ambiguity that often delayed escalation. Today, however, the rapid deployment of satellite constellations, unmanned aerial vehicles, and artificial intelligence-enabled analytics has significantly reduced this uncertainty, allowing both India and China to maintain near-continuous monitoring of border regions. This technological shift has enhanced situational awareness but has simultaneously compressed decision-making timelines, increasing the risk that localized incidents could escalate into broader confrontations (Bajpai, 2022; Tellis, 2021).

Satellite surveillance has become a central pillar of this transformation. High-resolution imaging capabilities now enable both sides to track troop movements, infrastructure development, and logistical patterns with unprecedented precision. The increasing availability of commercial satellite data has further democratized access to intelligence, allowing not only state actors but also independent analysts to scrutinize developments along the Line of Actual Control. This transparency, while reducing the possibility of strategic surprise, also creates pressure on governments to respond quickly to perceived provocations, thereby intensifying the security dilemma (Joshi, 2023).

Unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly referred to as drones, have added another layer to this evolving technological landscape. Drones are particularly suited to high-altitude operations, where traditional reconnaissance methods are often constrained by terrain and weather conditions. Their ability to conduct persistent surveillance without risking human lives makes them an attractive tool for both defensive monitoring and potential offensive operations. However, the use of drones also introduces new risks, as misinterpretations of their intent or accidental incursions into contested airspace could trigger rapid escalation. The increasing reliance on such systems reflects a broader trend toward automation in military strategy, where human judgment is increasingly supplemented—and at times constrained—by machine-generated data (Bajpai, 2022).

Artificial intelligence has further amplified these dynamics by enabling the processing and analysis of vast amounts of data in real time. AI-driven systems can identify patterns, predict potential threats, and assist in strategic planning, thereby enhancing operational efficiency. However, this reliance on algorithmic decision-making raises important concerns about reliability and accountability. Errors in data interpretation or algorithmic bias could lead to miscalculations, particularly in a high-stakes environment where decisions must be made rapidly. The integration of AI into military systems thus introduces both opportunities and vulnerabilities, reshaping the calculus of conflict in complex ways (Tellis, 2021).

Beyond the physical domain, the China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute has increasingly extended into cyberspace, where information warfare plays a critical role. Digital platforms have become key arenas for shaping narratives, influencing public opinion, and reinforcing national positions. Both India and China engage in strategic communication efforts aimed at domestic and international audiences, using media, social networks, and official statements to assert their claims and counter those of the other side. This competition over narratives reflects the growing importance of perception in modern geopolitics, where legitimacy is often constructed through information as much as through physical control of territory (Joshi, 2023).

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Cyber capabilities also introduce the possibility of non-kinetic forms of conflict, such as cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, communication networks, and military systems. While such actions may not result in immediate physical damage, they can disrupt essential services, undermine public confidence, and create strategic advantages without crossing the threshold of conventional warfare. This blurring of boundaries between war and peace complicates traditional notions of conflict, making it more difficult to distinguish between routine competition and hostile action (Kello, 2017).

The convergence of surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities has effectively created a "digital frontier" in the Himalayas, where control over information and data is as **महत्वपूर्ण** as control over territory. This transformation challenges traditional military doctrines, which were primarily designed for physical engagement, and requires new frameworks for managing escalation and maintaining stability. In particular, the speed and opacity of technological systems increase the likelihood of misperception, where actions intended as defensive measures may be interpreted as offensive threats.

In this evolving context, the role of technology in the China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute is both enabling and destabilizing. While it enhances the capacity of states to monitor and secure their borders, it also introduces new risks that are difficult to predict and control. The challenge for both India and China lies in developing mechanisms to manage these risks, including confidence-building measures related to technological use, transparency in military activities, and norms governing behavior in cyberspace. Without such measures, the increasing reliance on advanced technologies may inadvertently heighten tensions, transforming the dispute into a more volatile and unpredictable conflict environment (Bajpai, 2022; Tellis, 2021; Joshi, 2023).

VIII. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The Eastern Himalayas constitute one of the most ecologically fragile and biologically diverse regions on the planet, forming part of a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot. This region, which includes Arunachal Pradesh, sustains dense forests, rare wildlife, and complex river systems that support millions of livelihoods downstream. However, the intensification of geopolitical competition between India and China has introduced new pressures that are reshaping this delicate ecological balance in profound and often irreversible ways. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that environmental fragility in the Himalayas must be understood alongside geopolitical dynamics, as the two are deeply interconnected (ICIMOD, 2023; UNEP, 2022).

Climate change has emerged as a critical stress multiplier in this region. Rising global temperatures have accelerated the rate of glacial retreat across the Himalayan range, leading to significant changes in river flow patterns. Glaciers that once functioned as stable freshwater reservoirs are now shrinking, resulting in unpredictable seasonal water availability. Initially, this process may increase river discharge due to rapid melting, but over time it threatens long-term water security as glacial reserves diminish. The Brahmaputra basin, which originates in the Tibetan plateau and flows through Arunachal Pradesh, is particularly vulnerable to these changes, making the region central to both ecological stability and human survival (IPCC, 2021; ICIMOD, 2023).

In addition to glacial retreat, shifting monsoon patterns and erratic precipitation have intensified the frequency of extreme weather events such as flash floods, landslides, and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs). These disasters not only damage infrastructure but also disrupt local communities and fragile ecosystems. The increasing unpredictability of climatic conditions complicates both civilian planning and military operations, as infrastructure built in such unstable terrain faces heightened risks of collapse or damage (UNEP, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of infrastructure in the name of national security has significantly contributed to environmental degradation. The construction of roads, tunnels, airstrips, and military installations often requires large-scale deforestation and land modification. In mountainous terrain, even minor alterations can destabilize slopes, increasing the likelihood of landslides and soil erosion. The blasting of rock for road construction weakens geological formations and disrupts natural drainage systems, leading to cascading environmental consequences. These patterns have been observed across Himalayan border regions, where strategic infrastructure projects frequently intersect with ecologically sensitive zones (Chellaney, 2025; World Bank, 2021).

Hydropower development further intensifies these challenges. Both India and China have invested in dam construction along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, viewing it as a source of renewable energy and strategic leverage. However, large dams alter natural river flow, affect sediment transport, and disrupt aquatic ecosystems. They also pose risks in seismically active zones such as the Himalayas, where earthquakes could trigger catastrophic failures. For downstream populations, these projects generate concerns about water availability, ecological sustainability, and disaster vulnerability, thereby linking hydropolitics with environmental security (Chellaney, 2025; IPCC, 2021).

The presence of military forces in ecologically sensitive zones introduces additional environmental stress. Troop deployment, construction of bunkers, and maintenance of supply chains contribute to pollution, waste generation, and habitat disturbance.

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The increased use of heavy machinery and vehicular movement further degrades the environment, while the accumulation of non-biodegradable waste in high-altitude areas poses long-term ecological risks. Such impacts highlight how militarization can accelerate environmental degradation in already fragile ecosystems (UNEP, 2022).

What makes the situation particularly complex is the inherent tension between environmental sustainability and national security. Both India and China perceive infrastructure development and military preparedness as essential for safeguarding their territorial interests. However, these very measures can undermine the ecological stability that sustains human and economic security in the long run. This creates a paradox where efforts to enhance security in the short term may generate vulnerabilities in the future, reinforcing the concept of "environmental security dilemmas" in geopolitics (Dalby, 2020).

Moreover, the transboundary nature of environmental systems in the Himalayas complicates governance. Rivers, ecosystems, and climate impacts do not adhere to political boundaries, making unilateral actions insufficient for effective management. Despite this reality, cooperation between India and China on environmental issues remains limited, constrained by broader geopolitical tensions and mutual distrust. The absence of robust institutional mechanisms for joint environmental governance increases the risk of mismanagement and conflict over shared resources (ICIMOD, 2023; World Bank, 2021).

In this context, the environmental dimension of the China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute cannot be treated as a secondary concern. It is intrinsically linked to questions of security, development, and regional stability. Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward more sustainable and cooperative approaches, including environmentally sensitive infrastructure planning, data sharing on climate and hydrological changes, and confidence-building measures focused on ecological preservation (UNEP, 2022).

Ultimately, the Eastern Himalayas are not merely a strategic frontier but a shared ecological system whose stability is essential for both nations. The failure to integrate environmental considerations into geopolitical decision-making risks transforming the region into a zone of compounded crises, where ecological degradation and strategic rivalry reinforce each other in a cycle of instability (IPCC, 2021; Chellaney, 2025).

IX. CONCLUSION

The China–Arunachal Pradesh dispute represents a complex and evolving geopolitical challenge that extends far beyond traditional notions of territorial conflict. It encompasses a wide range of factors, including narrative construction, religious legitimacy, infrastructural development, resource competition, technological innovation, and environmental sustainability.

The interplay of fear, desire, and security ensures that the dispute remains deeply entrenched, reflecting broader patterns of rivalry between India and China. Arunachal Pradesh has thus emerged as a critical node in the geopolitical landscape of Asia, where competing visions of power and identity intersect.

Resolving this dispute will require a comprehensive approach that goes beyond traditional diplomacy, incorporating cooperation on shared resources, confidence-building measures, and a rethinking of security paradigms. Until such efforts are realized, the Himalayas will continue to serve as a contested space, reflecting the complexities of modern geopolitics and the challenges of coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world.

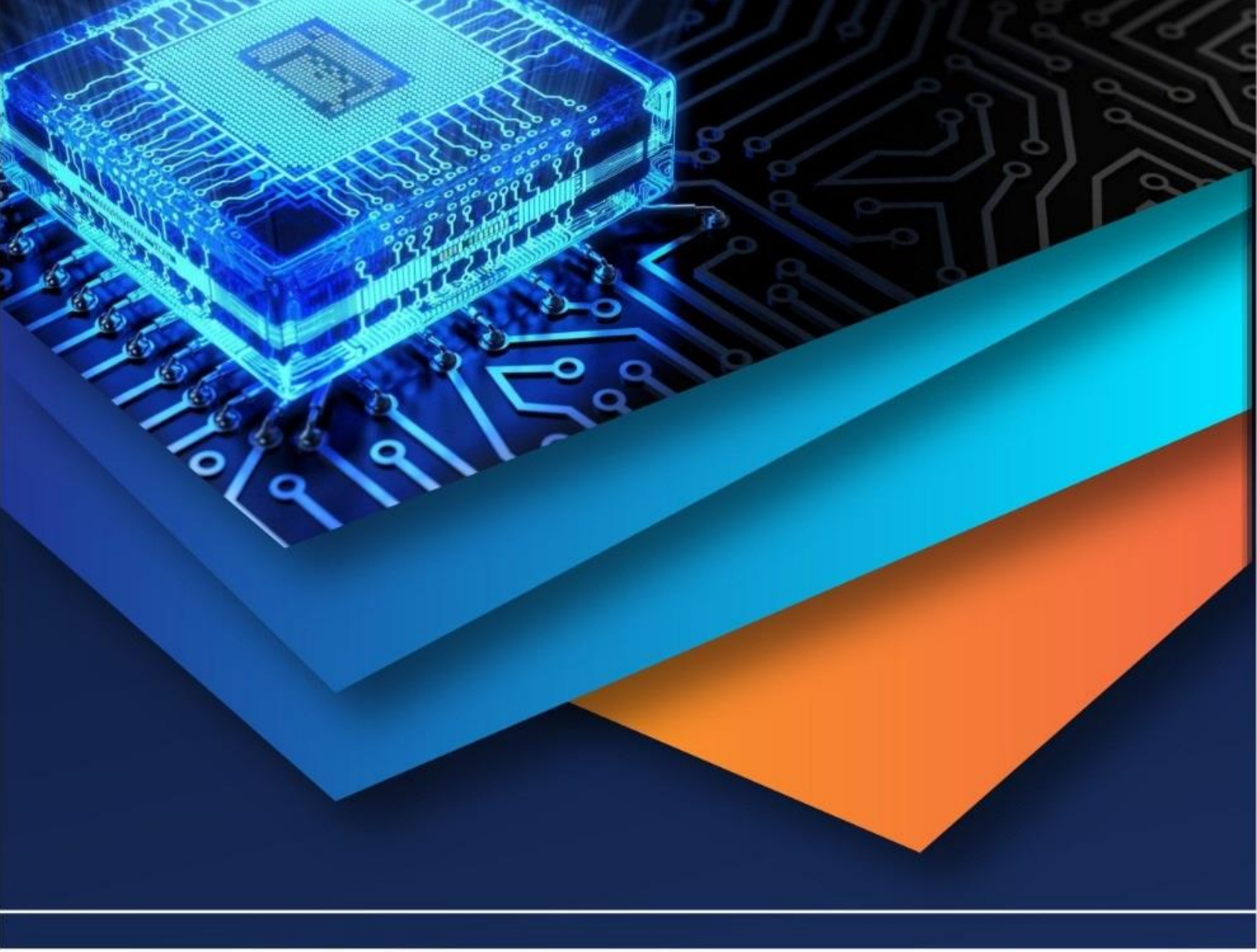
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