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Indian Border Security Poor Management in Evidence

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Burgeoning Threats and Challenges

With a landmass of sub-continental proportions, India occupies a predominant strategic position in Southern Asia and dominates the northern Indian Ocean with a coastline that is 7,683km-long and an exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that is over two million square kms in size. India's land borders exceed 15,000kms and it shares these with seven countries including a small segment with Afghanistan (106kms) in northern Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), now part of the Northern Areas of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The length of India's land borders with its neighbours varies considerably:¹ Bangladesh - 4,339kms (4,351kms as per MoD²); Bhutan 605kms (700kms); China - 3,439kms (4,056kms); Myanmar - 1,425kms (1,643kms); Nepal - 1,690kms (1,751km); Pakistan - 3,325kms (3,244kms).

Due to the proclivity of India's neighbours to exploit India's nation-building difficulties, the country's internal security challenges are inextricably linked with border management. The challenge of coping with long-standing territorial and boundary disputes with China and Pakistan, combined with porous borders along some of the most difficult terrain in the world, has made effective and efficient border management a national priority. However, due to the lack of understanding of such military issues among the decision-making elite, India's borders continue to be manned by a large number of military, para-military and police forces, each of which has its own ethos and each of which reports to a different central ministry at New Delhi, resulting in almost no real coordination in managing the

borders.

External threats to India's security are not the only border management issue dealt with at present by the national security apparatus. India's rate of growth has far outpaced that of most of its neighbours and this has generated problems like mass migrations into India. Other threats and challenges have also emerged. The border security scenario is marked by: increased cross-border terrorism; infiltration and ex-filtration of armed militants; emergence of non-state actors; nexus between narcotics traffickers and arms smugglers; illegal migration; left-wing extremism; separatist movements aided and abetted by external powers; and, the establishment of madrasas, some of which are potential security hazards.³

Manning the Line of Actual Control with China

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China offers an illustrative example of the lack of coordination in border management. The western sector of the LAC in Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh and the Middle Sector along the Uttarakhand border are manned by some Vikas battalions of the Special Frontier Force that reports to the Cabinet Secretariat and by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) that is a Ministry of Home Affairs police force. Infantry battalions of the Indian Army man the Sikkim border and units of the Assam Rifles (AR) man the Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram borders. The AR is a para-military force under the Ministry of Home Affairs that is officered mostly by regular army officers. Its battalions have been placed under 'operational control' of local army formation commanders. Though the

responsibility is that of the army, the AR battalions given to the army for border manning operations are not directly under its command, an arrangement that is not conducive to fostering a professional relationship between the commanders and their subordinates.

Operationally, the Northern and Western Commands are responsible for military operations along the LAC in portions of the Western Sector. The Middle Sector on the Uttarakhand border is under the operational jurisdiction of the Central Command while the Eastern Sector along the Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh borders comes under the operational control of Eastern Command.⁴ On the other hand, on the Tibetan side, the entire LAC is managed by Border Guards divisions of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) under a single PLA commander of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement signed with the Chinese in 1993 and the agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field signed in 1996 were expected to reduce the operational commitments of the army from having to permanently man the difficult LAC with China. However, it has not been possible to withdraw a single soldier from the border with China so far. In fact, despite the 1996 agreement on Military CBMs, several incidents of Chinese intrusions at Asaphi La and elsewhere in Arunachal Pradesh have been reported in the press and

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have been discussed in Parliament. While no violent incident has taken place in the recent past, there have been occasions when Indian and Chinese patrols have met face-to-face in areas like the two "fish-tail" shaped protrusions in the north-east corner of Arunachal Pradesh.⁵ Such meetings have an element of tension built into them and the possibility of an armed clash can never be ruled out.

In the western sector in Ladakh, the lie of the LAC is even more ambiguous because of several "claim lines" and due to the paucity of easily recognisable terrain features on the Aksai Chin plateau. This makes it difficult to accurately correlate ground and map, except in the area of the Karakoram Pass, which lies on the high Karakoram Range. Both the sides habitually send patrols up to the point at which, in their perception, the LAC runs. These patrols leave "tell-tale" signs behind in the form of burjis (piles of stones), biscuit and cigarette packets and other similar markers in a sort of primitive ritual to lay stake to territory and assert their claim.

These issues are debated during the meetings of the China Study Group that is jointly chaired by the Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS) and the Foreign Secretary. There is an inherent contradiction in sending soldiers to patrol what they are told and believe are Indian areas and then tell them that they must not under any circumstances fire on "intruding" Chinese soldiers. This is the reason why it is operationally critical to demarcate the LAC on the map and the ground after joint physical surveys. The inadequacy of recognisable terrain features can be overcome by exploiting GPS technology to accurately navigate up to the agreed and well-defined LAC on the ground and avoid transgressing it even unintentionally.

The Western and Other Borders

In the west, the entire border with Pakistan is manned by the BSF except the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The LoC is the responsibility of the army with some BSF battalions placed under its operational control. Since the LoC has been mostly active on a daily basis, particularly since the early-1990s, this is a good arrangement. For over 50 years since the Kashmir conflict began in 1947-48, soon after independence, the two armies were engaged in a so-called 'eyeball-to-eyeball' confrontation with daily loss of life and property that could justifiably be called a 'low intensity limited war.' Since 25 November 2003, however, an informal ceasefire has been in place all along the LoC, including at the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) along the Salto Range west of the Siachen Glacier.

The border with Nepal was virtually unattended till very recently as Nepalese citizens have free access to live and work in India under a 1950 treaty between the two countries. Following the eruption of a Maoist insurgency in Nepal, however, efforts have been made to gradually step up vigilance along this border as India fears the southward spread of Maoist ideology. The responsibility for this has been entrusted to the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), the erstwhile Special Security Bureau, that is now a Ministry of Home Affairs force. For the Bhutan border, the BSF shares the responsibility with the SSB. Since the Royal Bhutanese Army drove out the Bodo and ULFA insurgents from its territory some years ago, the border has been relatively quiet. The border with Myanmar also remains operationally active and several insurgent groups have secured sanctuaries for themselves in Myanmar despite the cooperation extended by the Myanmar army. The cross-border movement of Nagas and Mizos for training, purchase of arms and shelter when pursued by Indian security forces, combined with the difficult terrain obtaining in the area, make this border extremely challenging to manage. This border is manned jointly by the army and some units of the AR.

Along the Bangladesh border that has seen increasing action in recent years, the BSF is in charge. This border remains in the news as there are frequent clashes between the BSF and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). This border has a peculiar problem that is usually referred to as 'Enclaves and Adverse Possessions.' "There are 111 Indian enclaves (17,158 acres) within Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves (7,110.02 acres) in India."⁶ Thirty-four tracts of Indian land are under the adverse possession of Bangladesh and 40 pieces of Bangladeshi land are in India's adverse possession. Though the Land Border Agreement of 1974 has provisions for the settlement of the issue of adverse possession, it has not been implemented so far as the problem is politically sensitive. Unless the political leadership invests time and effort to resolve this sensitive issue, unseemly clashes that do no credit to either side will continue to occur and spoil relations between the two countries.

Issues for better Border Management

Ideally, border management should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs during peacetime. However, the active nature of the LoC and the need to maintain troops close to the LAC in a state of readiness for operations in high altitude areas, have compelled the army to permanently deploy large forces for this task. While the BSF should be responsible for all settled borders, the responsibility for unsettled and disputed borders, such as the Line of Control (LoC) in J&K and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the Indo-Tibetan border, should be that of the Indian Army. The principle of 'single point control' must be followed if the borders are to be effectively managed.

Divided responsibilities never result in effective control. Despite sharing the responsibility with several para-military and police forces, the army's commitment for border management amounts to six divisions along the LAC, the LoC and the AGPL in J&K and five divisions along the LAC and the Myanmar border in the eastern sector.

This is a massive commitment that is costly in terms of manpower as well as funds, as the deployment areas are mostly in high altitude terrain, and needs to be reduced gradually. The real payoff of a rapprochement with the Chinese would be the possibility of reducing the army's deployment on the LAC. To some extent, the advances in surveillance technology, particularly satellite and aerial imagery, can help to maintain a constant vigil along the LAC and make it possible to reduce physical deployment as and when modern surveillance assets can be provided on a regular basis to the formations deployed forward. Similarly, the availability of a larger number of helicopter

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units will enhance the quality of aerial surveillance and the ability to move troops to quickly occupy defensive positions when it becomes necessary. However, these are both costly ventures and need to be viewed in the overall context of the availability of funds for modernization.

The deployment patterns of central police organizations (CPOs) are marked by ad hoc decisions and knee-jerk reactions to emerging threats and challenges, rather than a cohesive long-term approach that maximises the strength of each organization. G P Bhatnagar has identified the following lacunae: deployment of multiple forces in the same area of operations; lack of any doctrinal concepts; designed for a 'fire fighting' approach rather than a 'fire prevention' or proactive approach; based on a strategy of 'reaction and retaliation' rather than on holistic response to a situation, resulting in stress and decision-making problems at the functional level; wastage of energy and efforts; and, lack of coordination and synergy between the security management organizations.⁷

The recent nomination of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) as the national-level counter-insurgency force should enable the other central para-military forces (CPMFs) like BSF and ITBP to return to their primary role of better border management, as recommended by the Task Force on Border Management constituted by the Group of Ministers (GoM) formed to review major issues pertaining to the management of national security after the Kargil conflict.⁸ The task force led by former Home Secretary, Madhav Godbole, has made several far-reaching recommendations. It has recommended that all para-military forces managing unsettled borders should operate directly under the control of the army and that there should be lateral induction from the army to the para-military forces so as to enhance their operational effectiveness and suggested several perceptive measures for better intelligence coordination.⁹

The task force studied steps needed to improve border management and suggested measures for appropriate force structures and procedures to deal with the entry of narcotics, illegal migrants,

terrorists and arms. It also examined measures to establish closer linkage with the border population to protect them from subversive propaganda to prevent unauthorised settlements and to initiate special developmental programmes.¹⁰ The recommendations of the task force have been accepted by the GoM and are being implemented in phases. While some action has been taken, clearly, much more needs to be done to make border management more effective.

Endnotes

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2. "National Security Environment: An Overview," Ministry of Defence, www.mod.nic.in.
3. G P Bhatnagar, "Border Security," SP's Land Forces, Vol. 2, Issue 6, 2005.
4. "Seal of Trouble," Force, Vol. 1, No. 12, August 2004.
5. "An IB (Intelligence Bureau) report (No. DIBUO No-12) which corroborates the Chinese consolidation and LAC violation has been sent to the PMO and the home ministry... The IB report says that until last October, there were 195 successful attempts by the Chinese to violate the LAC." Ajay Upreti, "Watch that Line: China Violates LAC and Intensifies Activities on the Border," The Week, 1May, 2005.
6. Bhatnagar, n. 3.
7. Ibid.
8. "Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security," Ministry of Defence, mod.nic.in/new_additions/chapter-i.pdf.
9. PK Vasudeva, "Reorgan - ising the Defence Set-up," Tribune, 27 November, 2000.
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