Border Management in Northeast : Paradigms of Technology Driven Tactical Interface

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The Northeastern India starts from the junction of Indian states

of West Bengal, Sikkim and Assam alongside Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and China in its close vicinity. The Northeastern region has common borders with five out of seven of Indian neighbours and all of them are different in their structures and peculiarities. The common thread amongst all these borders is inhospitable terrain, low development quotient alongside complexities of socio-economic and cultural milieu impacting on internal as well as external security of the region. These borders are open except Bangladesh where there is a border fencing manned by the BSF. All other borders are well settled except China wherein they have not resolved the Sino (Tibet)-Indian border till date.

The discussion on border management in Northeastern India warrants identifying the nature of border and activities of inimical elements which deserve attention of the government and the executing agencies. In this context, it can be stated that none of the borders in the region are peaceful due to ongoing insurgencies, a socio-political affliction across all the states. These insurgencies have been initiated and sustained with the active support of the external forces so as to destabilise India. Hence, there is an external as well as internal security element when it comes to border management planning in the Northeastern region.

In that, the Chinese footprint has been identified in most of the insurgent movements in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram with cascading effect in other areas of the region. Complicity of ISI of Pakistan is also well established in providing support and safe

sanctuaries to Indian insurgent groups in the erstwhile East Pakistan which continues even today by Bangladesh to some extent. There are more than 70 insurgent groups in the Northeastern region, most of them have their safe sanctuaries across the porous borders, viz. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Therefore, area dominance and population control are also an adjunct to the border management exercise. In consequence, control of insurgencies is an extension of border management in the Northeast regional context.

The government has a "one border one force" policy based on recommendations of a Group of Ministers (GoM) for better operational synergy, albeit there is a scope of making it more effective. The department of border management, established in 2004, has been entrusted with the responsibility of all matters associated with land borders and costal borders, with the exception of LOC in the Jammu and Kashmir sector. The roles and responsibilities of the Border Management include fencing and floodlighting, surveillance and patrolling, security infrastructure development, intelligence and establishing integrated Check Posts (ICPs).

The approach, as employed by the government towards border management, is categorised into four essential processes to include guarding the borders, regulation of the borders, development of border areas and constitution of consultative mechanism to resolve the disputes, if any. This format is more applicable to the settled parts of the international borders dealing primarily with civil criminal activities during peace time. Whereas, that is not the case with Northeastern region of India which has been in the state of "no war no peace" since Independence.

The BSF has been given the responsibility of 4096 km long border with Bangladesh. The border is well defined, except few enclaves inside each other's territories which have been resolved by exchanging these enclaves for administrative ease. Camps of Indian insurgents and illegal immigration of population from Bangladesh into India are two major areas of concern besides normal criminal activities. The entire border, except 50 km riverine sector, is fenced and there are 802 border out posts (BOPs) as of

now. 383 more BOPs have been sanctioned to manage this border.

The Assam Rifles has been taking care of 1643 km border with Myanmar. India shares a porous border with Myanmar that spans across Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Nagaland (215 km), Manipur (398 km), and Mizoram (510 km). It's an open border without any fencing with provision of movement of population up to 16 km on either side of the border for the economic activities. The terrain is inhospitable, full of dense jungles with minimal roads and tracks making it conducive for insurgents and the criminals to hide once chased by the security forces. The ethnic and cultural ties with the population astride the border makes it further difficult to monitor the movement of people from one country to the other. The insurgencies in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Assam could be sustained due to nature of Indo-Myanmar border.

Nepal and Bhutan both have well defined open borders with India, with no restrictions on movement of population and commercial activities. The Seema Suraksha Bal (SSB) has been given the responsibility of border management with Nepal and Bhutan. There are designated crossing places and freight corridors for transportation of goods and services from Nepal and Bhutan to Kolkota Port. The ULFA insurgents had made lower hills of Bhutan their hide outs during peak of their movement in late 1990s. They were evicted by the Bhutan army in "Operation All Clear" between 15 Dec 2003 and 03 Jan 2004. While there are elaborate security protocols to deal with the criminal activities, the main areas of concern are : complicity of Pakistan to use Nepal for terrorist activities and emerging Chinese footprints in Nepalese as well as Bhutanese landscape.

The most important areas from the border management point of view lie along our northern border with China. It encapsulates Sino-Indian border in the states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. China has cleverly orchestrated disputes in areas which provide them observation as well as domination of avenues leading to Tibetan border from Indian side. The axes astride rivers leading to the watershed in Tawang and five valleys in rest of Arunachal Pradesh fall in this category. China is known to send their patrols frequently in these areas to assert their claim over their perception

of the LAC. Looking at the penchant for military aggressiveness by China, the Sino-Indian border warrants optimal military presence with reserves located close by to respond to any adverse situation.

While entire Arunachal Pradesh is claimed by China, there are no disputes in Sikkim except status of tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan at the tip of Chumbi Valley at Doklam. China claims it to be seven km further south as it facilitates direct observation into Siliguri Corridor. The military geography suggests that the Siliguri Corridor is the most vulnerable piece of land which has potential of severing the entire northeast from the mainland India. Therefore, this sector happens to be the biggest challenge for the border management in northeastern region.

As regards other states, due to insurgency, the format of border management warrants focus on people and their activities across the IBs as well as in the hinterland. Accordingly, surveillance and intelligence mechanism assumes importance, given the type of terrain, similarity of ethnic composition and complicity of civil society in anti-national and criminal pursuits. While the border management falls under police mandate, dealing with the armed militants with external linkages may need support of the army when the situation happens to be beyond capabilities of CPOs to handle due to their structural inadequacies. Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Tripura and Tirap-Changlang sector of Arunachal Pradesh are most disturbed areas which need quasi-military involvement alongside policing duties.

While there is an apparently functional border management mechanism, its structures and processes continue to be manpower intensive with limited cognitive and physical capabilities to deal with complex and hybrid nature of the job content. The system does not have the operational effectiveness to achieve the requisite dominance and deterrence to dissuade insurgents and criminals from their inimical indulgences. The entire border management process is reactive in concept and executed in a set pattern routine manner by varied forces and agencies with communication and coordination disconnect, especially, at lower cutting edge level.

There is a need to change the manpower intensive linear surveillance matrix to technology empowered information centric border management system which is time sensitive, focussed, efficient, with larger span of influence and catering for reserves for effective response. The concept is to shift from threat based reactive mindset to capability based proactive doctrine by empowering the individuals and formations through battlefield transparency, information awareness, night enablement, mobility and force protection.

The essential tactical design for a technology driven border management mechanism should include "detect movements and activities in-depth across the IB, read pattern of activities and analyse intentions of the movements, identify likely areas of interests and sanctuaries on either side of the IB, plans and *modus operandi* of criminals/ insurgents, force deployment at the IB/LAC and depth areas, intervention and finally the neutralisation." While there are numerous government agencies co-opted in the entire sequence of tactical activities, the synthesis and synchronisation needs to be done under one field commander wrested with full authority and accountability. Therefore, seemingly isolated and watertight way of functioning of different agencies involved in the business of border management has to be replaced with unified command structure at all levels of operational matrix.

Apropos, the operational parameters and the technology needs to be dovetailed with each other to maximise their effectiveness on the basis of varied military, insurgency and criminal content in context of each of the sectors. The emerging technologies in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, space and aerial surveillance, communication and network centricity, Global Positionshing System (GPS), drones, Night Vision Devices (NVDs), radars, battle management systems (BMS), Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4 I) systems and aerial and ground mobility transportation means etc. may be incorporated in reference to the envisaged tasks in a need–based pragmatic manner in Indian context.

The satellites have capability to observe over a vast area and can be utilised to study the structural configurations and changes if any in the areas of interest. The drones are useful in day and night surveillance, patrolling, tracking the targets and providing real time information to the commanders in variety of contingencies. The interceptors and jammers can be utilised for intelligence gathering and tracking the movements. There are plethora of optronic and communication equipment for smart fencing and border surveillance, besides providing seamless flow of information to the planners and the ground troops. The Information Technology (IT) and AI provide means to store and study the data for synthesis of the available information to establish patterns and suggest options for operations based on digital analysis.

There are war gaming modules available capable of task analysis, allocation of resources, their mobilisation, route guidance, target analysis and engagement by designated weapon and platform. The technology as on date has tools and mechanisms to reduce the time consuming human interface across the entire spectrum of the border management. The operations in Afghanistan and Syria have amply demonstrated the use of technology for surveillance by drones and neutralisation of targets by precision strike weapon systems reducing human interface. The network centricity is of a kind wherein the entire area of interest is being monitored all the way back from the US. However, such a technology infusion would require appropriate changes in the organisations, processes and work culture, besides recruiting, training and psychological reorientation to handle these devices and systems by the Indian troops.

Besides technology, the international cooperation is also a mandatory part of border management to optimise the effectiveness of the entire process. It would help in checking cross border criminal activities like drugs peddling, human trafficking, smuggling of banned items, movement of insurgents and destruction of their camps etc. It may also need political pressures and mediation through friendly foreign countries to help in resolution of contentious interstate problems .There is a problem of displaced populations like Chakmas, Rohagiyas, Chin, Bruz,

Tibetans, Bangladeshi Muslims, Lishus etc. wherein international support may be required to facilitate their return to their original habitats. They are, as on date, spread across the Northeastern region and are adding to socio-political and border management problems.

The border management in Northeast is a highly complex matter with variety of socio-political disturbances, economic deprivation and political opportunism which has far too many parameters to be considered in arriving at an appropriate mechanism. The psychological disconnect from the national mainstream is another factor responsible for the vulnerability of the local population by the inimical forces and the insurgents. The Chinese conduct on the LAC is reflective of their design to keep India on backfoot which has strategic connotations necessitating politico-military response with inherent diplomatic sensitivities.

Therefore, no single template fits in for border management in the Northeastern region. All the borders need a separate treatment based on its own historical legacies, demographic peculiarities, insurgencies and socio-political afflictions. Whatever be the border management design on each of these sectors, there is a need to utilise technology to get better of the terrain, hostile people and criminals responsible for disturbed public order in the region. The technology in turn has to be suitably interfaced with the tactical requirements for planning and conduct of operations for efficient and effective border management and much needed hinterland control synergies.

The dichotomy is that military, by its composition and training is too strong a force and police/CPOs, fall short of capabilities to handle the border management cum insurgencies in Northeastern context. There is a tendency to call in Army by the administration even in seemingly manageable situations by the police and CPOs due to "play safe syndrome" with intent of evading the accountability at times. The correct philosophy should be to restructure and train the police forces who are mandated for internal security in all its dimensions. The government has been working towards this objective in right earnest with plans to

empower the police and CPOs through technology. Media is abuzz with news of technology driven "smart border management systems'' being introduced along settled and fenced western borders. Whereas, looking at the complexity of northeastern borders it would require ''smarter border management'' with much higher technology empowerment to handle the operational intrigues not only on the open borders, but also the complicity of local population in their inimical socio-political afflictions.

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