

Infrastructure Development in Border Areas

General Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd)@

Introduction

In the 1950s, the road, rail and air infrastructure in Tibet was as primitive on the Chinese side as on the Indian side of the line of actual control (LAC). It was estimated till the end of eighties by India that infrastructure in Tibet being what it was, the Chinese would require one season to prepare and concentrate their forces and the second season to fight operations for any meaningful gains against India. This would, therefore, give India sufficient time to concentrate their forces to ward off any threat.

However, the Chinese put in massive efforts to develop the Western, Central and Eastern Highways, Beijing Lhasa railway line, Gormo Lhasa fuel pipeline and 7-8 international airfields capable of day-night operations. They have gone ahead and further extended the road and rail networks right up to the LAC in most areas. This now gives them the ability to launch large scale operations within 3-4 weeks, a truly amazing feat, making India's defensive task that much more difficult.

For a soldier to fight at his optimum level, he needs to be provided, besides good leadership, the necessary wherewithal in terms of clothing, equipment, ammunition and logistic support to produce decisive results. Availability of good infrastructure enables him to be supplied with these basic requisites through multiple options, thereby enhancing his mobility, survivability and flexibility. Poor infrastructure, on the other hand, becomes a handicap and limits his options, thus denying him the capability to give off his best.

Historical Perspective

The British policy of developing those areas of India which provided them with economic profitability resulted in a lopsided and haphazard development of infrastructure in India. Thus, the quadrilateral connecting Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai became the focus of infrastructure development, to the detriment of the rest of the country. No wonder, at the time of Independence, areas like the north eastern states had just one tenuous metre gauge line, predominantly running through Assam, connecting them to the rest of India. The gap between the two has been so great that even 68 years after Independence, it has not been fully bridged.

However, areas closer to the borders have perhaps been bigger sufferers as far as infrastructure development is concerned. As the focus has been on developing those which have large populations, remote areas with smaller populations got ignored. The Inner Line Permits policy of the Government also literally shuts them off to tourism and consequent growth and development.

The Army too has to share the blame for lack of infrastructure in these areas. Post the Chinese aggression in 1962, a deliberate policy of non-development of infrastructure in border areas was followed till the end of eighties. The rationale was that any future attacks by the Chinese would get delayed due to lack of infrastructure in these forward areas, in the process giving us vital time to prepare and move troops to counter the threat. Such a theory presupposed loss of national territory from the word 'go' and aimed at checking deeper inroads by utilising time thus available. It was totally defensive in nature, attempting more to minimise loss of territory than to win the war.

Damage Due to Lack of Infrastructure

In hindsight, the consequences of these policies have been disastrous from all angles. Firstly, while the rest of the Country has progressed, matching development has not taken place in the border areas. Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are much higher here as compared to the other more developed parts of the country.

Secondly, lack of infrastructure in border areas has inhibited exploitation of their rich natural resources, to the detriment of national economic growth. China is fully exploiting the vast mineral resources of Tibet, thanks to the infrastructure it has created there. Additionally, lack of infrastructure is a constraint to the growth of tourism.

Thirdly, the assimilation of these areas with the rest of the Country has been much slower. Sections of population here do not feel fully aligned with India. There is a feeling of neglect when compared with other parts of the Country. The degree of alienation and resentment felt by the inhabitants often finds expression in insurgencies taking roots, creating major internal security problems for the nation. No wonder, most north eastern states have experienced some insurgency or the other at different points in time. ULFA, Naga, Mizo and Manipuri insurgencies are clear examples of this phenomenon.

Fourthly, external support forthcoming for such insurgencies impinges on territorial integrity of the Country and keeps the nation busy with trying to eliminate them. On one hand, inimical powers exploit local alienation to create instability and divisiveness at minimal cost to themselves, and on the other, own precious and scarce resources get diverted to tackle these insurgencies, thereby hitting the country's growth and development.

Fifthly and most importantly, lack of infrastructure in these areas has severely limited the ability of our troops to defend our territory successfully. The Indian Army soldier is known the world over for his bravery and fighting capabilities. However, he needs the necessary wherewithal to acquit himself creditably.

Current State of Our Border Areas

On our side of the LAC, we are still dependent on one single, tenuous road axis in most areas facing the Chinese. In the Tawang Sector in Arunachal Pradesh, an area claimed by the Chinese, only one axis from Tezpur, Bomdila, Sela to Tawang and Bumla is existing till date, as was the state in 1962. Likewise, in Sikkim, areas like North Sikkim are dependent on one narrow road for sustenance during operations, leaving troops at a major disadvantage. In the

northern sector in East Ladakh, we still have not achieved road connectivity up to crucial outposts like Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO). In the central sector in Barahoti area, our roads terminate 20-30 kms short of the LAC, leaving us in a vulnerable position.

The above state is a cumulative effect of neglect, poor appreciation of national priorities, resource constraint, vote bank politics and indifference to local aspirations. However, it has a direct bearing on the territorial integrity and national security of the Country. We need to examine reasons for it in depth and take corrective action before we are exposed to a 1962 like situation once again.

Funding

Lack of funds has always been a major constraint in development of infrastructure in border areas. In our Country, the concept of a welfare state has invariably received greater priority even at the expense of national security. Higher populated underdeveloped areas have been the beneficiaries of larger funding than border areas most of the time, even where territorial integrity of the nation was at stake. With defence getting merely 1.8 per cent of GDP on an average for the last six years, it has negligible ability to allocate funds for development of infrastructure. Ministries of surface transport and railways find it non remunerative to spend funds for these projects. There is thus, within the Government, a confusion and reluctance to earmark funds for border area infrastructure development. No wonder in Assam, upgradation of railway line from Rangiya to Murkokselen has taken decades to fructify and the rest of Arunachal Pradesh has no rail infrastructure till date! Project for rail connectivity from Sundernagar to Ladakh in J&K is still on the drawing board. Only 17 of the 73 strategically important roads identified by the China Study Group (CSG) have been completed after a period of almost 15 years. A number of airstrips, constructed during Second World War in these areas are non functional purely because no funds were allocated to maintain them for decades.

There is a need for a central coordinating ministry purely for border area development. Adequate funding needs to be specifically allocated for construction of road, rail and air infrastructure which would cater for defence requirements as well.

Environmental Clearances

A number of important projects are held up for want of environmental clearances. To cite an example, a large number of areas close to the LAC have been declared as sanctuaries or reserves by the Sikkim government e.g. Pangolakha Wildlife Sanctuary, Kanchanjunga National Park, Tso Llommo Cold Desert Reserve etc. without approval of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) which is mandatory for all areas located within 50 kilometres of the LAC. No infrastructure development can be carried out in these sanctuaries and reserves without taking environmental clearances from the state and central governments as well as the Supreme Court. In some cases, obtaining clearances has taken as long as 7 to 8 years.

The rationale for environmental clearances was introduced to ensure that degradation of the environment is not carried out by unscrupulous profit seekers by indiscriminate felling of trees without any compensatory forestation. Logically, it should not have been applicable to military forces who wish to construct infrastructure for security of the country. In any case, the military has an enviable record of not only protecting and maintaining infrastructure but enhancing it.

Thus the vital issue of national security becomes hostage to our own rules and regulations, impinging severely on defence preparedness. A case to do away with environment clearances requirement where national security is concerned is already in the Supreme Court. This needs to be pursued expeditiously for speedy implementation.

Land Acquisition

The state governments have been sluggish in acquiring land vitally needed for infrastructure development in the border regions. Sometimes, local politics and interests have predominated, resulting in avoidable delays. An alternate axis to Tawang has not fructified after 15 years of efforts so far primarily because of land acquisition issues. And this is an area which the Chinese strongly claim as an extension of Tibet, which should be handed over to them!

Once again, where security of the nation is involved, land acquisition should be immediate irrespective of any constraining factors. If required, appropriate laws should be framed to ensure speedy acquisition in such cases.

Top-Down Approach

This is one area where, for a variety of reasons, only a top-down approach would work. First and foremost, on the political side, very few understand and appreciate the importance of national security. Both within the Government and the Parliament, there are hardly any members of the political class who have had a formal exposure to issues of national security and defence. Thus, there is a natural reluctance to delve in to these issues and instead depend on the bureaucracy, whose own knowledge is limited.

Secondly, since national security has nothing to do with their political constituency and its problems, their interest in it is perfunctory. They prefer to deal in issues which concern their constituents, thus depicting them in good light and ensuring their future re-election.

Thirdly, experience for the past 68 years has shown that a bottom up approach has not worked and we have been slow in establishing better infrastructure in our border areas. It is time we took the other route and hope it works!

Lastly, issues like funding, land acquisition, enabling legislation, higher awareness of security issues by the political class, appropriate organisation etc. would be better handled if a top-down approach is followed.

Revamping the Border Roads Organisation (BRO)

Low profitability, huge costs, security restrictions and lack of appropriate expertise and equipment have discouraged private enterprises from undertaking road construction projects in these remote areas. Inhospitable terrain and non availability of labour for carrying out hazardous tasks like road and rail construction are additional constraining factors. It is, therefore, imperative in view of national security implications, for the state and central agencies to step in.

Unfortunately, Border Roads Organisation (BRO) under the MoD, whose prime charter it is to undertake such projects, has not been able to deliver. It suffers from the following drawbacks:-

- (a) Its resources stand frittered on non essential tasks which can well be undertaken by other central and state agencies.
- (b) It lacks the organisation and manpower to take on all the tasks envisaged for it.
- (c) It does not possess state of the art equipment to undertake road construction in these inhospitable areas in a time bound manner.
- (d) Poor compensation and difficult service conditions have made BRO an unattractive organisation for recruitment.
- (e) Most importantly, BRO lacks adequate funding.

Conclusion

On our western border against Pakistan, we have fairly well developed infrastructure. This is one of the reasons for the conventional edge that we enjoy over it. However, the same cannot be said about our northern and eastern borders, where China enjoys a definitive edge. Once again, its massive infrastructure in Tibet has placed it at a major strategic advantage. These examples highlight the importance of good infrastructure.

It is also a fact that infrastructure development is a time consuming process. On an average, a project starting today may take 10 years or above to be completed. Remoteness of border areas and difficult mountainous terrain increases cost of construction exponentially. To spread out the cost factor would again imply longer construction period. Keeping this in mind, the earlier we start, the better it would be for our national security, earlier exploitation of natural resources and quicker assimilation of border areas within the Indian Union.

Some suggestions to get on with infrastructure development in border areas expeditiously have been mooted above. A lot more can be done if there is the political will and a clearer understanding of the implications of national security at the highest levels. Let us hope we are not too late even now to tread this difficult and arduous path.

@General Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned in the Regiment of Artillery on 11 Jun 1967. He was Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army from Oct 2007-Mar 2010.

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