

BORDER MANAGEMENT INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER

The continued violence in Manipur and allegations that illegal entrants from Myanmar have played a major role in fomenting the trouble there has brought the necessity of effective management of Indo-Myanmar border into sharp focus. Four North-Eastern States of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh share the 1643 Km long border of India with Myanmar.

The level of border guarding/management along this border can be said to be at a stage even lower than what existed along the borders with Pakistan both on the East and West prior to 1965. The Armed Forces which were responsible to guard those borders at that time were maintaining at least some presence along the border by establishing a few Border Observation Posts (BOPs). However, that is not the case with Indo-Myanmar border. Even though Assam Rifles (AR) has been designated as the border guarding force for the Indo-Myanmar border as per recommendation of the 'Group of Ministers' after the Kargil episode it has consciously decided to continue operating from Company Operating Bases (COBs) located in depth far away from border.

These COBs are more suited for the role of AR as a Counter Insurgency Force of the North East (NE) rather than border guarding. COBs being located far away from the border do not facilitate continuous 24/7 domination of the border. The border being open is also subject to exploitation with ease. The information about any crime happening near the border is therefore unlikely to reach AR in proper time frame to prevent a border crime or apprehend criminals because the difficult under developed terrain prevents swift movement of troops to reach the crime scene from COBs located far away.

Even though the border is properly demarcated, it remains open to encroachment and exploitation by criminals because of inaccessibility and lack of 24/7 surveillance.

Inaccessibility is one important reason often cited by AR for not adopting the forward posture to establish BOPs along the border because the lack of road communication will prevent proper logistics support to troops deployed on the BOPs. While the problem of logistics for BOPs is a fact, yet the inertia to develop such infrastructure for over 20 years after being declared a designated force to guard this border is indicative of reluctance to venture out of the comfort zone.

It is important to realise the fact that the terrain along Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir and Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Siachen is comparable to the terrain along border in Arunachal where the Indian Army has evolved a very effective logistic chain along these de-facto borders. Further, the terrain along border with Bangladesh in Eastern Tripura and Western Mizoram – guarded by Border Security Force (BSF) - is exactly the same as along border with Myanmar in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur for which AR is responsible. Road connectivity to some areas along these borders guarded by BSF has come up only in last few years.

The BSF, however, has always manned these borders in forward posture with deployment on BOPs sited close to border thereby ensuring continuous surveillance and domination of border. Troops were and even now are being logistically supported through helicopter sorties on many BOPs on these borders. Such sorties are also made available for evacuation of troops in case of emergencies. Suffice to say that some infrastructure could have been created close to border in

the last 20 years and troops pushed forward to man the BOPs for round the clock surveillance starting initially with the sensitive portion of the border.

Another factor necessitating round the clock guarding of border is the 'Free Movement Regime' (FMR) prevailing along border with Myanmar. FMR provides for tribals to cross from designated points. However, open borders and absence of forces other than at the designated points, makes it difficult to regulate the entry and exit effectively. The border being open, the tribals easily come in and go out from anywhere without the forces coming to know of it. This increases the scope of tribals illegally settling in India. A forward deployment on BOPs will obviate this problem as it will enable proper monitoring of all entrants.

Another factor effecting proper management of this border is inadequate force level earmarked for border guarding/management role by AR. Even if the yard-stick of inter-say distance of 3.5 Km between two BOPs as a yardstick fixed by MHA, is applied to this border also, a total of 470 BOPs will be required to be established. Considering an average of 15 BOPs to a unit (BSF unit of 7 Companies with 6 deployed and one training reserve), a total of 32 units along with supervisory headquarters will be required. The AR unit with 6 companies (5 deployed and one training reserve) will thus require many more units in forward deployment on BOPs. AR has 46 units but only 15 are earmarked for border management with the balance remaining tied down with the role of Internal Security. In view of the fact that the North East has more or less remained peaceful after 'cessation of operation' with insurgent groups came into effect in early this century, more units could have been earmarked for Border management. This preoccupation of AR with Internal Security has prevented it from evolving effective SOPs and drills for border management.

It will not be prudent to ignore the potential of revival of separatist insurgencies in the North East (NE) especially in view of what is happening in Manipur for which AR may not be able to spare any additional units for border guarding. It will, therefore, be prudent to deploy a force other than AR exclusively for border guarding and AR assigned internal security role exclusively. AR with deep historical connect, knowledge of terrain, culture and ethos of NE and vast experience of operating against insurgents and separatists in that area will be more effective in this role. This besides ensuring proper border guarding will go a long way in improving internal Security situation in the NE.

The BSF with over 57 years of experience of border guarding along India – Bangladesh and India – Pakistan border in varying terrain including the one similar to India - Myanmar borders in Tripura and Mizoram are best suited for being assigned the task of guarding India - Myanmar border. BSF should establish and operate from BOPs located close to the border which will, besides serving as bases for tactical operations to guard the border also present a face of Government authority to the border population living in those remote areas.

Another factor in favour of deployment of BSF along this border is that it was deployed to guard parts of this border in Manipur till early this century. It was de-inducted consequent upon AR being assigned to these borders. BSF continues to have presence in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. These establishments of BSF will prove very effective in ironing out issues if any with concerned State authorities thereby smoothening the induction process.

One important task of border guarding forces is to promote a sense of security amongst border population. This is achieved not only by carrying out tactical operations to dominate border but also by identifying and projecting problems of border population to concerned authorities. The

BSF, as a sole visible symbol of Government authority, in remote border areas has been carrying out this role very effectively and thus help integrate the border population with main stream.

However, the prerequisite for forward deployment is creation of adequate infrastructure along the border in due course of time. Creation of infrastructure viz composite BOPs, Border Road and Obstacle System will also provide employment opportunities to border population and wean them away from antisocial activities.

Induction of BSF will have to be phased with more sensitive border along Manipur being taken over in first phase followed by Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal. Additional units of BSF will have to be raised. It can initially be done by pooling troops from existing units and simultaneously recruiting fresh personnel for raising additional units. The entire transition should be carried out in properly planned phases so that domination along sensitive border with Pakistan and Bangladesh is not diluted.

BSF troops will require familiarisation with terrain and culture of the area, dynamics of FMR and various bilateral agreements with Myanmar having bearing on operating along those borders.

In 2014 there were several reports suggesting that Ministry of defence had agreed to hand over this border to BSF with rider that it will continue to control AR as it has a major role in case of war in the east. The BSF was to be deployed by end of 2014. However, the proposal did not materialise.^[1] Reportedly the Government of India is once again considering deployment of BSF on this border.^[2]

However, there is a need to take an early decision to deploy a regular Border Guarding force for continuous domination of India – Myanmar border is extremely important to curb any further illegal migration from as troubled Myanmar. This will go a long way in enhancing National Security, both along the border and internally too.

End notes

[1] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Defence-ministry-allows-BSF-to-guard-India-Myanmar-border-but-with-rider/articleshow/34944260.cms>

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bsf-to-guard-myanmar-border-from-later-this-year-546823#:~:text=%22From this year itself%2C we will start guarding,General Subhash Joshi told media persons in Siliguri>

[2] <https://www.amarujala.com/india-news/union-home-ministry-seriously-considering-the-proposal-to-hand-over-the-security-of-myanmar-border-to-bsf-2023-07-10?shareonApp>

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