

# Border Management: Need for Reform

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## **Burgeoning Threats and Challenges**

With a landmass of subcontinental proportions, India occupies a predominant strategic position in Southern Asia and dominates the northern Indian Ocean with a coastline that is 7,683 km long and an exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that is over two million sq km in size. India's land borders exceed 15,000 km and it shares these with seven countries, including a small segment with Afghanistan (106 km) in northern Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), now part of the Northern Areas of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). According to the Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the length of India's land borders with its neighbours is as follows: Bangladesh — 4,351 km; Bhutan — 700 km; China — 4,056 km; Myanmar — 1,643 km, Nepal — 1,751 km; Pakistan — 3,244 km.

Due to the proclivity of India's neighbours to exploit the country's nation-building difficulties, India's internal security challenges are inextricably linked with border management. This is so because Indian insurgent groups have for long been provided shelter across the nation's borders by inimical neighbours. 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, with almost no real coordination in managing the borders.

External threats to India's territorial integrity are not the only border management issue that the national security decision-makers need to deal with. India's rate of growth has far outpaced that of most of its neighbours and this has generated peculiar problems like mass migrations into India. The demographic map of Lower Assam has been completely redrawn by illegal migration from Bangladesh over several decades. Other threats and challenges have also emerged. The border security scenario is marked by increased cross-border terrorism; infiltration and exfiltration of armed militants; emergence of non-state actors; nexus between narcotics traffickers and arms smugglers; left-wing extremism; separatist movements aided and abetted by external powers; and, the establishment of *madrasas*, some of which are potential security hazards.

**Border  
guarding forces  
have limited  
coordination  
with the Army.**

### **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 central sector along the Uttarakhand border are manned by some Vikas battalions of the Special Frontier Force of the Cabinet Secretariat and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) that is a Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) police force, respectively. 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. This arrangement is not conducive to fostering a professional relationship between the commanders and their subordinates.

The Border Peace and Tranquillity 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 Confidence-Building Measures

(CBMs), several incidents of Chinese transgression have been reported in the press and have been discussed in the Parliament. While no violent incident has taken place in the recent past, on several occasions, Indian and Chinese patrols have met face-to-face. 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 co-relate ground and map, except in the area of the Karakoram Pass, which lies on the high Karakoram Range. Both 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. It is imperative that the ITBP be placed under the Army’s operational control for better border management.

## **The Western and Other Borders**

In the west, the entire border with Pakistan is manned by the Border Security Force (BSF) except the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Ensuring the integrity of the LoC is the responsibility of the Army with some BSF battalions placed under its operational control. Since the LoC had been active on a daily basis till the unofficial ceasefire of November 25, 2003, 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’. The informal ceasefire along the LoC and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) along the Saltoro Range west of the Siachen Glacier has, by and large, held up well.

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. Since the eruption of a Maoist insurgency in Nepal, efforts have been made to gradually enhance 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 (MHA) force. For the Bhutan border, the BSF shares the responsibility with the SSB. Since the Royal Bhutanese Army drove out the Bodo and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) insurgents

from its territory some years ago, the border has been relatively quiet. The border with Myanmar also remains operationally active. 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 the Indian security forces, combined with the difficult terrain in the area, make this border extremely challenging to manage. This border is manned jointly by the Army and some units of the AR. Recent reports that the MHA intends to deploy BSF battalions on this border and take away the AR do not augur well for efficient management along this border.

**India's Border Management strategy is based on policy of Reaction and Retaliation.**

Along the Bangladesh border that has seen active 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, and 51,000 people live in these. 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 Indira-Mujib Land Border Agreement of 1974 had provisions for the settlement of the issue of adverse possession; it could not be implemented due to political sensitivities. In September 2011, India and Bangladesh signed a historic agreement on the demarcation of land boundaries. However, the Indian Parliament has not so far ratified the treaty. 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 That Need to be Resolved**

Ideally, border management should be the responsibility of the MHA during peace-time. 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 LoC in J&K and the 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 need to be reduced gradually. The real pay-off 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 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 modernisation. Also, rapid deployment forces will need to be kept ready for unforeseen eventualities.

The deployment patterns of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) 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 organisation. According to Dr. G. P. Bhatnagar, a practitioner and a perceptive observer of the border management scene, the major lacunae that exist in the process include the deployment of multiple forces in the same area of operations and the lack of well articulated doctrinal concepts. He has also written that border management is designed for a "fire-fighting" approach rather than a "fire prevention" or proactive approach; it is based on a strategy of "reaction and retaliation" rather than on a holistic response to the prevailing environment, resulting in stress and decision-making problems at the functional level; it leads to wastage of energy and efforts; and, the lack of coordination and synergy between the security management organisations is harmful to the national interest.

A task force on border management was constituted by the Group of Ministers (GoM) formed to review the major issues pertaining to the management of national security after the Kargil conflict. It was led by Madhav Godbole, a former Home Secretary, and had made several far-reaching recommendations. It had recommended that the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) should be designated as the primary national level counter-insurgency force. This would enable

the other CAPFs like the BSF and ITBP to return to their primary role of better border management. It had also recommended that all security 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. Besides these recommendations, it had suggested several perceptive measures for better inter-agency and inter-ministerial intelligence coordination.

The task force had studied the steps needed to improve border management and had suggested measures for appropriate force structures and procedures to deal with the entry of narcotics, illegal migrants, terrorists and small arms. It had also examined measures to establish closer linkages with the border population to protect them from subversive propaganda, to prevent unauthorised settlements and to initiate special developmental programmes. The recommendations of the task force were 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. It is time the Godbole task force report on border management is de-classified and put in the public domain.

Finally, the management of unresolved or disputed borders and the Lines of Control/ Actual Control should be the responsibility of the Army. The CAPFs deployed on such borders should be under the Army's operational control. Modern Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Information, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (C4I2SR) capabilities need to be employed extensively to cover gaps, particularly in remote and inaccessible areas and to supplement human surveillance and patrolling. Acclimatised quick reaction forces should be held as reserves at places like Leh — with dedicated transport helicopters — for reacting in case of unforeseen transgressions or intrusions. The usefulness of border fencing should be evaluated vis-à-vis the cost of construction and the annual maintenance cost. And, the depth up to which a CAPF can patrol or chase intruders inside own territory should be promulgated by the state governments.

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