



CLAWS

The Unaccountability of India's Border Roads Organisation

■ Dr. Monika Chansoria

Recurrence of strain in India-China relations is reflected time and again when Chinese transgressions in the border areas in the northeastern and western theatre throw caution to the winds, only to reestablish that Beijing apparently has chosen to keep the boundary and territorial dispute alive as a tactical pressure point against India. New Delhi should certainly not give in to the unfounded demand by China—that of suspending infrastructure development activities near the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India finally appears to be hitting the right notes with Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju confirming that plans that are afoot to construct a road network along the international boundary from Mago-Thingbu in Tawang to Vijaynagar in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Reacting sharply to India's plans, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement, "... the boundary issue between China and India is left by the colonial past. We need to deal with this issue properly... there is a dispute about the eastern part of the China-India border." India's Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, was quick to reject any counselling from the other side, saying that nobody should "threaten or warn India". This often impels one to question if China has ever offered an explanation for the blizzard that they term

as infrastructure stack-up in the Tibetan Autonomous Region adjoining India? It is well known that the LAC has not been physically demarcated on the ground and on military maps. China's reluctance, or for that matter, refusal, to show its version of the LAC points towards a larger dodgy ploy of progressively building up its case for claims in eastern Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh.

In the backdrop of these hostile strategic realities, it is only imperative to outline the jaded and laid-back approach adopted by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), a quasi-military set-up established in 1960, tasked with developing and maintaining strategically vital infrastructure in the border areas. The current status of India's logistics preparedness, especially road infrastructure in the western and northeastern sectors of the country can be termed simply as pitiable. Have we chosen to conveniently discount the exigency of China's massive *blitzkrieg* in the name of air, road-, and rail-networked infrastructure all along its border areas with India? It, indeed, is ironic that while India has successfully launched the *Mangalyaan* (Mars Orbiter Mission), on the ground, an organisations such as the BRO has proved to be an abject failure and just cannot get its

The Unaccountability of India's...

act together in the construction, repair and maintenance of strategic roads in the India-China border areas.

In the many extensive road trips that I have embarked on, both across Arunachal Pradesh (starting from Assam) and all through the Ladakh sector up north, I was horrified to see the poor condition of the roads that lead up to the border areas. In the case of the former, while the initial part of the journey till Tezpur in Assam is reasonably all right, the wearisome part begins thereafter. The first major stretch lies from Tezpur to a village named Tenga in Arunachal Pradesh. Placed right on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border lies Bhalukpong—a quaint little township. Close to Bhalukpong, there is a particular stretch, which is a mockery in the name of being called a road. Measuring a mere 8 km, it takes more than half-an-hour to cross this stretch and should be considered as the first warning of what lies ahead. Towards reaching the border with China are some picturesque villages and small townships, namely Bomdila, Dirang Valley and the Sela Pass, situated at an altitude of 13,700 ft. The strategically located town of Tawang lies approximately 80 km from the Sela Pass. The topography in a high altitude terrain such as this is such that heavy rains and landslides through out the year make the already muddied roads slushier. Despite these realities, what catches the eye is the insufficient planning of the drainage system, witnessed all through the uphill climb till Tawang and beyond. Far worse, in many places, there is a complete absence of drains which, in turn, messes up all construction/repair activity, whatever little is happening. Moreover, culverts, meant for flow of water, under are either missing or remain perennially blocked.

The BRO, shockingly, still seems to favour “hiring of some of its equipment... It does not make sense to have all the equipment.” No prizes for guessing that the pace of the construction work is preposterously slow. The sense I got during these visits was that explanations for never-ending delays in the commencement of

construction/repair activity of roads are quick and generic. India's border infrastructure projects are plagued by procedural delays. Beginning with acquiring forest and wildlife department clearances and land acquisition to contractors unwilling to work in far-flung areas, the frequent local strikes, damage caused by the heavy rains and the complications of working in high altitude terrain. According to the Standing Committee on Defence of the Fifteenth Lok Sabha, the Ministry of Defence stated that there are 12 forest/wildlife cases pending for want of clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) for construction of the Indo-China Border Roads (ICBR). In what comes as slight relief to the constant impediment pertaining forest clearances, in a written communication to the MoEF, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has asked for states with international borders to be empowered to provide environment and forest clearances to speed up infrastructure projects along the borders. Further, the government has asked the states to constitute separate cells for initiating forest and environment clearances for projects up to 100 kms at their respective levels, and refer projects beyond that to the Centre. In the specific case of Arunachal Pradesh, the immediate aim reportedly is to accelerate construction of approximately 6,000 kms of the road network in the area.

While there is no denying that these issues do, in fact, pose grave challenges, the moot question remains: how long can India afford to put its national security at risk in the garb of these pleas? In fact, the massive infrastructure and logistics build-up being undertaken by China all across the Tibet Autonomous Region including national road and rail transport systems, has enhanced the Chinese People's of Liberation Army's (PLA's) land-based transport capabilities which shall double up as base support for China's military. More significantly, China's military force projection and application capability against India has been upgraded and its overall strategic and operational flexibility has

been improved. Standing at the Bumla Pass at the McMahon Line — forming the Sino-Indian border in Arunachal Pradesh according to India — I saw a smooth, well maintained, metal track road on the Chinese side in great contrast to the dismal state of roads in India's eastern sector. The Chinese are far ahead not just in terms of construction of infrastructure along the borders with India, but also its regular maintenance and upkeep. A 12-member road maintenance team at nearly 5,000 m altitude on the Que'er mountain in southwest China's Sichuan province under the Dege County Road Management Bureau is located along the 317 State Highway in Dege county in Ganzi Tibetan autonomous prefecture, western Sichuan province, as per Chinese sources. Stationed at the highest position among all road maintenance teams along the No. 317 State Highway, the team's major job is to maintain a 10-km section of the highway, mostly involving breaking open the road blocked by snowstorms, landslides or rain-triggered mudslides.

Border Roads Organisation: “Time-bound Accountability” Required

The BRO makes excellent proverbial statements such as “... providing the backward northeastern region, with a road communication network, to support its future development”. The statement provokes one to ask, what is it that the BRO has been able to change drastically in the past five decades? It is high time that the BRO explains its lackadaisical approach and is made more accountable. Strict timelines need to be set and time-bound objectives should be drawn. Moreover, there should be better coordination between the BRO roads and other special border area schemes in order to optimise effort and cost outlay.

Interestingly, claims made in Parliament averring that “BRO is developing 82 strategically important roads in the Northeast to double lane and class IX” are,

most certainly, not visible on the ground — in fact, not even close to that. Perhaps a detailed sketch of every one of these “82 roads” along with the exact respective progress report would bring more clarity to the murky picture that unfortunately prevails today. Tall claims made by the BRO in 2012 — that “... by 2014, you will see a marked difference across the borders... combining both big and small schemes, we are working on more than 2,000 road projects (along the borders)” — can be termed as sheer travesty given that the situation on the ground tells a different story altogether. It was stated by the BRO way back in 2008, “We have identified 3,400 km of roads along the border as critical... This comprises 61 roads and we plan to complete it in a time-bound manner by 2012.” As 2014 draws to a close, the stated objective is not even close to being achieved.

The BRO's budgetary requirements are being provided by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. The BRO is working on 700 roads covering a length of 28,200 km and maintaining 22,000 km of roads. It has been claimed that 73 roads projects (which are critical and strategically important) have been planned for development along the India-China border in a time-bound manner. Of these, 16 roads have already been completed; 38 roads were scheduled for completion by 2013, and 19 roads by 2016. The status updates and details of all these roads need to be provided by the BRO. However, unfortunately, that is not the case. Even the website of the BRO is outdated with no latest updates made available. The Standing Committee on Defence of the Fifteenth Lok Sabha, Demands for Grants (2012-2013) provides details of the Annual Works Plan of 2012-13, in which Rs 4,985 crore (Rs 1,517 crore for Agency Works and Rs 3,467 crore for General Staff Works), were planned by the BRO and subsequently had received approval. Yet again, no information is provided by the BRO on the status of the progress on the ground.

On another level, the army and civil engineers of the BRO have been engaged in recurring rows that

...Border Roads Organisation

have adversely impacted and derailed India's strategic infrastructure buildup programme. A slew of BRO projects has been dedicated to the eastern sector and western sectors including *Arunak*, *Vartak*, *Sewak*, *Pushpak*, *Himank*, *Beacon*, *Dantak*, *Setuk* and *Udayak*. Project *Beacon*, focussed on the Leh-Karu-Upshi-Loma-Dungti-Chusul, sKaru-Tangtse-Chusul, Dugti-Demchok and Tangtse-Lukung-Phobrang, totals 1,250 kms. Subsequently, *Beacon* was bifurcated with the raising of Project *Himank* covering construction of roads in the Ladakh area beyond Leh including three of the highest passes of the world, Khardungla, Tanglangla and Changla. Of the 255-km-long critical passage, nearly 160 kms of the Durbuk-Daulat Beg Oldie road, providing connectivity to Daulat Beg Oldie—the last point before the Karakoram Pass—has been completed, but a 110-km stretch needs to be relaid. In the 12 roads that are being constructed under *Himank*, the grim reality is that only three are complete. *Vartak* was initially launched to cater for Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and is currently working on nine critical roads to be built. Later Project *Arunank*, was carved out from *Vartak* owing to a need for a Project Headquarters (HQ) to be located within Arunachal Pradesh, with

double laning a part of NH-52 being a vital objective of this project. Besides, *Udayak* executes work in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Assam and has been entrusted with construction of four critical roads in Arunachal Pradesh.

It is long overdue that the BRO be made far more accountable than what has been the case thus far. Bifurcating existing projects into new ones has not helped in that the pace of work has been the same with deadlines getting extended time and again, and no liability whatsoever. More importantly, there is a pressing need for a detailed logistical analysis on the specification for movement of heavy vehicles on critical roads and the consequent impact on the wear and tear of the roads. In what could be termed a despondent reality, the border roads today are not in sync with the management of heavier tonnage vehicles and their load carriage capacity. At the end of the day, constructing a road in high altitude terrain is no doubt the primary task, however, its quick repair and regular maintenance is equally vital, or else the principal achievement of building the road shall be wasted as time goes by.



Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Senior Fellow and Head of the China-study Programme at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi.