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ADVANCED LANDING GROUND (ALG) IN INDIA'S EASTERN SECTOR: FURTHER ENHANCING DEFENCE AGAINST CHINA

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One of the major persisting issues between India and China has been the unresolved border dispute. The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh that lies south of the McMahon line, is being contested by China despite the 1914 Shimla convention signed between British India and Tibet. China with its military reorganisation which is currently underway, aims to integrate its scattered airstrips in the Tibet region through its now unified Western Theatre Command. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that India ups the ante by bolstering its defensive as well as its offensive capabilities in its border regions in order to counter as well as deter any future Chinese transgression. For this, there is a need to further improve the logistic support to the large number of ground troops stationed in the region by ensuring quick deployment of troops and equipment. Thus, the establishment of Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) in Arunachal Pradesh by the Indian Air Force (IAF) is a right move towards this end.

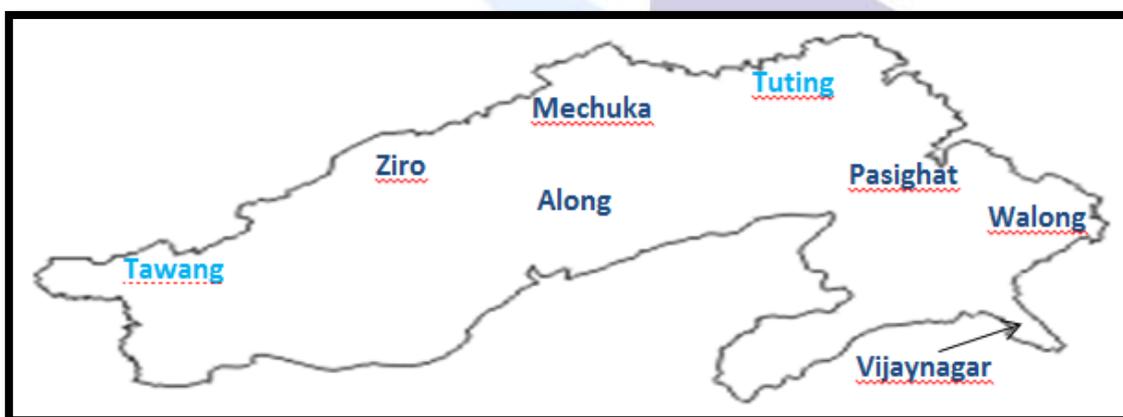


Figure 1: Six Operational and Proposed ALGs in Arunachal Pradesh

Figure 1 shows the present number of ALGs in operation within Arunachal Pradesh along with those that are in the process of becoming operationalised. Last week India's Union Minister of State

for Home, Mr Kiren Rijiju, formally inaugurated the ALG in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh; in the presence of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Air Command, Air Marshal C Hari Kumar. According to the Minister the ALG would be capable of operating all types of aircraft and helicopters and help in the overall development of the state.¹ While the ALG at Walong was inaugurated in October last year the ALG at Ziro, Along, and Mechuka were operationalised earlier this year. The ALG at Vijaynagar has been fully reactivated since November 2011.² This takes the total number of ALGs to six in the State, with ALGs coming up in Tuting and Tawang (which is the westernmost district of Arunachal Pradesh).

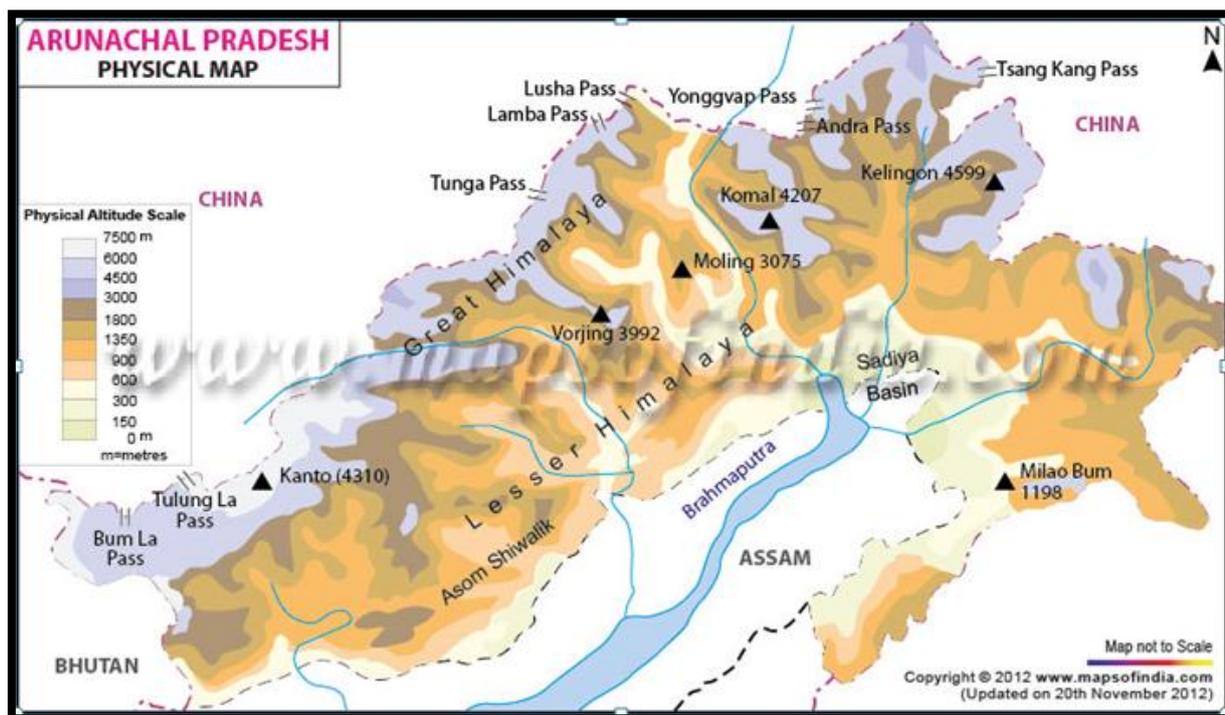


Figure Two: Arunachal Pradesh Physical Map showing major passes³

The physical map of Arunachal Pradesh in Figure Two shows some of the major mountain passes in the State. Since these mountain passes are close to the borders of China, they impose certain amount of vulnerabilities for India's eastern sector. On the Indian side there is a massive deployment of its ground forces and this would pose a major challenge for the Chinese. Further, the various ALGs established around these vulnerability points would provide another layer of capability for the Indian defence troops, as it would ensure efficient logistic support for the quick and efficient deployment of troops and equipment in case of any duel with the PLA. Earlier in the year, while inaugurating the upgraded ALGs at Ziro and Along, Air Marshal C Hari Kumar stated that this would further enhance the existing operational capabilities of the Eastern Air Command by providing for rapid deployment of troops as well as airlift in case of hostilities or a standoff. He further stated that the ALG would

provide for the operation of the C-130 J Super Hercules due to the upgraded runway surface. At the ALGs other infrastructure, such as air traffic control tower, has also been put in place.⁴ The construction of the ALG in the Tawang district currently underway is to ensure that the vulnerabilities imposed by the two mountain passes in this sector are addressed, and the ground troops deployed there are adequately provided for.

The establishment of ALGs in the region would also lead to a permanent settlement for IAF personnel for maintenance and repair of aircraft and also the deployment of mobile surface-to-air missiles in order to protect its assets; this would impose a major deterrence against any Chinese intent. It must also be realised that these airstrips – maintained by the Air Force – would also be used for carrying out civilian operations, thus enabling the growth of tourism and all the allied services related to the industry, unleashing a process of development of the areas in its vicinity, besides providing deterrence against China.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ “Kiren Rijiju dedicates Pasighat advanced landing ground to nation”, *Business Standard*, August 19, 2016, http://www.business-standard.com/article/printer-friendly-version?article_id=116081900620_1, accessed on August 23, 2016.

² “Vijayanagar ALG”, *NDTV*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.ndtv.com/topic/vijayanagar-alg/news>, accessed on August 24, 2016.

³ <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/arnachalpradesh/arnachalpradeshphysical.jpg>

⁴ “IAF reactivates two landing grounds in Arunachal Pradesh”, *The Hindu*, March 13, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/iaf-reactivates-two-landing-grounds-in-arunachal-pradesh/article8346657.ece>, accessed on August 23, 2016.