



PACE OF INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT IN BORDER AREAS: ADEQUATE?



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The India-China conflict of 1962 was fought in some of the harshest terrains that obtains anywhere on the globe – the Himalayas, which are a military leader's nightmare. The Himalayas are the highest mountain ranges in the world, with the average elevation (height above mean sea level) of most of the mountain passes being well above 10,000 ftmsl. In early years, these passes used to remain closed during the winter months due heavy snowfall. With the onset of summers, once the snow melts, the passes would become negotiable again. The period when the passes remained closed was more than two to three months, on average. Therefore, the winters was not considered an opportune period as a campaigning season for hostilities. Yet, China chose to attack India on 20 Oct 1962 in what has been termed as a 'self-defensive counter-attack war'.

China, even in the sixties, was able to mobilise resources more easily in the relatively flat 'plateau' region of Tibet in the Eastern theatre than India whose forces were deployed on high mountains with poor road connectivity. During the conflict, the PLA had proved its ability yet again (it had shown its prowess to carry out deep attacks, and in strength, during the Korean War) to marshal its resources and attack Indian positions in numbers that the Indian Army was unable to repulse. However, despite maintaining the momentum of its attack – and having reached as deep into Indian territory as the foothills in the Eastern sector near Misamari (Tezpur) – the Chinese abruptly announced a unilateral ceasefire on 21 Nov 1962 and announced to the world that beginning 1 December 1962, (China) would withdraw its troops 20 kilometres from the Line of Actual Control (LAC) existing between the two countries as on 7 November 1959. It was further clarified that in the eastern sector, Chinese troops would withdraw 20 kilometres north of the 'so-called McMahon Line'.¹

The world was stunned by this abrupt announcement by China which had made significant advances into Indian territory till then. Why did China do so?

Many historians and strategists have since advanced diverse views on the reason for this action by the Chinese. While some argue that China feared that the US would enter the war on India's side in case China were to escalate the conflict, others feel that China was not in a position to keep its troops resupplied (in the advanced positions they had occupied) once the passes closed for the winter. This would then make it easier for the Indian Army to carry out reprisal attacks against Chinese troops 'stranded' in Indian territory as the terrain would be in India's favour. Yet others argue that the intention of the Chinese leadership was only to 'teach India a lesson'.

The second argument appears more plausible, especially if we consider the road infrastructure (so necessary to ensure resupply of troops in battle conditions) that existed in the Tibet area in the early sixties – it was certainly not even a fraction of what we see today in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

On the Indian side, too, there were some notable events that transpired that reflect the state of infrastructure that existed on the Indian side in the early sixties. First is the airfield at Chushul – actually more of a dusty airstrip at an elevation of 14236 ftamsl – where intrepid AN-12 pilots of the IAF carried AMX-13 tanks for the Indian Army on 27 Oct 62 (after a lull in the fighting on 24 Oct 62). Flying in the tanks to Chushul was the only alternative as there were no roads from Leh through which tanks could be transported to Chushul at that time. These tanks were to be instrumental in preventing Chinese advances into the Ladakh sector when the second wave of attacks began on 18 Nov 62; the Chinese were prevented from capturing the strategically important Chushul airfield.

Today, the situation in this (Ladakh) sector is more advantageous to Indian troops as advanced landing grounds (ALGs) have been made at Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), Nyoma, Fukche and Chushul (still under development), with airfields at Leh, Thoise and Kargil completing the picture.

Likewise, in the North East sector (formerly known as NEFA), development of ALGs at Tuting, Mechuka, Ziro, Pasighat, Vijaynagar and Along has ensured rapid inter-theatre – as well as intra-theatre – movement of men and material for the Indian Army in case of a future conflict with China. ALGs at Tawang and Walong would fill the necessary voids in the respective sectors for quicker mobilisation. With the recent stand-off at Doklam in 2017, the Chinese now want to offset the strategic disadvantage they face with respect to Indian positions – that 'look down' upon Chinese roads in the Chumbi Valley – and have thus begun to create roads and infrastructure in the Eastern

regions of the Chumbi Valley. This is an attempt by the Chinese to expand the Chumbi Valley by encroaching into Bhutanese territory in the Doklam Plateau region, unmindful of international opprobrium in the bargain. All such (illegal) attempts by China must be resisted.

From all accounts of the 1962 conflict, the Chinese did suffer huge casualties during their attack in the Chushul sector – more commonly referred to as the Battle of Rezang La. The face-off between Indian and PLA troops in areas neighboring Chushul, i.e. DBO, Chumur and Demchok in recent years – all coinciding with visits to India by senior Chinese leaders – gives an indication that China is deliberately drawing world attention to these areas. Why? While DBO and Chushul fall adjacent to Aksai Chin, the ALGs at Nyoma and Fukcheare close to Demchok – an area of stand-off in recent times. Is it to signal to the Indian side that the PLA is present in strength in these areas and hence there should be no attempt at any ‘misadventurism’ (a la 1962, which as per the Chinese was a war started by India) to try and take back lost territory? To further bolster this (possible) stand, the Chinese have built Forward Area Arming and Refuelling Points (commonly referred to as FAARPs, and which cater to rearming and refuelling of helicopters) in an area adjacent to its military garrison at Ngari – barely 65 km East of Demchok. Presence of an airfield (15000 ft long) at NgariGunsa, 85 km South-east of Demchok, does not instil confidence about likely future designs of the Chinese in this sector.

While the infrastructure that has been built on the Indian side is continuing apace and necessary checks have been put in place (in terms of strengthening of the ALGs), refurbishment of roads – as a fall back option for resupply of forward posts, especially during extended periods of bad weather – also needs consideration, both in the Northern as well as the North East sectors.

(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])

Keywords: India-China Border Dispute, Doklam, Infrastructure developments, Border regions

Note:

¹ *What did China Gain at the End of the Fighting in November 1962?*; November 21, 2012; RS Kalha; IDSA Comment; https://idsa.in/idsacomments/WhatdidChinaGain%20attheEndoftheFighting_RSKalha_211112; accessed on March 08, 2018.