

SECURITY REPORT



Northeast Special

Hawkish India- A new Indian approach to deal with insurgency and security issues in Northeast India

Northeast India has always been one of the most critical and yet neglected regions of India. The 1962 war reflected profoundly on the issue of how vulnerable Northeast India could be. The criticality of Northeast India emanates from the fact that it is not only India's gateway to Southeast Asia but is also a huge repository of incredible human resource, culture, ethnic diversity as well as natural resources. However this place has been witness to major upheaval including prolonged insurgency, menace of drug trafficking, ethnic rivalries as well as massive cross-border infiltrations from Bangladesh because of which in states like Assam, the demographic alteration has reached alarming levels where the indigenous communities are on the verge of becoming minority and overwhelmed by the infiltrators. This apart, there has clearly been a cross border angle to insurgent violence in Northeast, be it the ULFA insurgency with its prime leaders allegedly based in Bangladesh for decades or Myanmar from where many

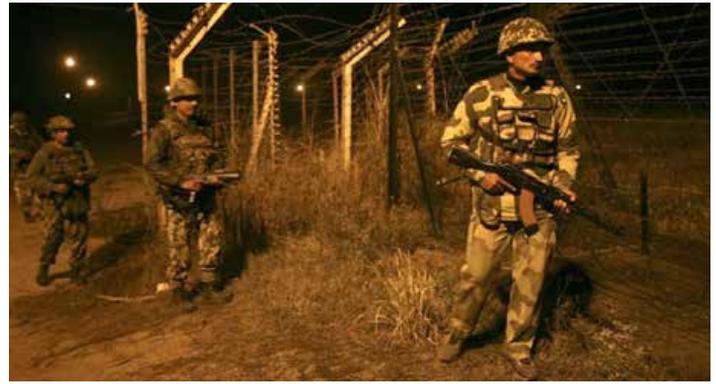
Northeast based insurgent groups have often launched attacks on Indian Armed Forces and have sneaked into the safe cocoon of Myanmar after executing operation in India. For decades it continued like that just as illegal infiltration continued. For decades Northeast was some kind of a forsaken place where no one ever thought things can ever improve and a place which never made much headlines in the mainstream media of the mainland. Things were getting bad to worse.

However, some critical change in policy of Government of India and its overall approach can be witnessed over the last two years. What was striking last year was when in June 2015 Indian Army for the first time launched a no hold barred Special Forces strike into the Myanmar by crossing the border and killed dozens of militants belonging to NSCN (K). This was in retaliation to an ambush on an Indian Army convoy in which 18 Indian Army Jawans were martyred. The strike of Indian Army inside Myanmar is said to have destroyed some key camps of militant groups operating inside Northeast India and have sent shivers across many such groups.

While many had thought that it was a one-off operation which may not get institutionalized, in May this year too, Assam Rifles, a paramilitary organization under the operational control of Indian Army, launched a similar cross border raid into Myanmar and killed 8 militants while arresting more than a dozen militants of CORCOM, a motley alliance of six banned militant organizations. This attack came in retaliation to another ambush on Assam Rifles that happened in May, 2016.

One thing that has been amply made clear now by Government of India is that it has started taking Northeast India very seriously and that the free run of militants would no longer be allowed. The message is clear that it would no more mind to go for hot pursuit and neutralize militants when the need be. While in the past as well army

operations were conducted in Bhutan (between 2003 and 2004) to flush out insurgent groups like ULFA, NDFB, KLO and NSCN operating from safe haven of forests in South Bhutan, the difference between that operation and operations now is that those operations were conducted jointly with Bhutanese Army taking the lead being assisted by Indian Army, this time the operations have been unilaterally executed by Indian Army.



Along with the change in the strategy of the Indian Army, the decision of the Government of India to shift the regional headquarter of ITBP from Shillong to Itanagar showed the how much seriously the Government of India is taking the issue of fortification of Indo-China border. The Government of India is already in the process of setting up 42 additional Border Out Posts (BOP) and raising of 12 additional battalions for ITBP for more intense patrol of Indo China borders. Further, the raising of Arunachal Scouts and Sikkim Scouts by Indian Army in the last few years along with the creation of Mountain Strike Corps also adds to the fortification of Northeast India.

However, one key thing that is yet to be concluded is that of the complete fencing of the Indo-Myanmar borders as well as a decision of replacing Assam Rifles with either ITBP or BSF for dedicated border guarding so that Assam Rifles can then entirely concentrate tackling insurgency. It is expected that this decision would be taken soon.

Assam- Bangladesh Borders to be sealed by June 2017

One of the key issues of Northeast India has been that of massive illegal infiltration from Bangladesh, so much so that not only the demography of Assam was getting overwhelmed by the illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh but also it was posing great danger to the sovereignty of India. The assembly election this time in the state of Assam was fought on the plank of foreigner issue. The overwhelming victory of BJP led NDA was expected brought with it the onus of fulfilling the poll promise of sealing the borders. While newly elected Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal had promised

to seal the borders in 2 years' time, the Union Home Minister has set a deadline of June 2017 to seal the borders with Bangladesh. In several parts of the Assam Bangladesh border, rivers are demarcation of border and thus managing such riverine borders have always been challenging. As per PTI, the Union Home Ministry has decided to fence 100 critical locations covering 11.9 km with fencing while another 22 locations spread of 48 km would have non-physical barriers such as sensors.

Sealing the borders of Assam is just one part of the major challenge of illegal infiltration that India faces whose tentacles are spread from Assam to Meghalaya to West Bengal. Therefore the whole menace of illegal infiltration from Bangladesh would not be complete unless sealing of borders in Assam is complimented by similar efforts in West Bengal and other states of Northeast.

Apart from the issue of illegal infiltration, another critical issue of concern for India is the rising spate of radicalization and instances of Bangladeshi based terror groups trying to create bases in India. The incident in Khagragarh, West Bengal where a module of Jamaat Ul Mujahideen (JMB) was arrested on charges of making explosives and the investigation thereafter, has revealed the extent of threat that Bangladesh based terror groups pose to India. Recently ISIS has claimed to have set up a base in Bangladesh with the objective of targeting India apart from targeting Bangladesh Government. Sealing of borders are thus a great initiative and there are ample array of equipment available in the global market to make the task of sealing difficult borders easy.

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