

Border Roads Organisation in the North-East: Need for Priority

Gautam Sen

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The Defence Minister of India had assured the Parliament in May 2012 that 82 strategic roads in the north-east were being double-laned, as priority, to provide effective logistical facility to India's defence forces in the Arunachal Pradesh border with China. India's road network in the region constructed and maintained by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) involves nearly 11700 km of roads. BRO was conceived and raised in 1960 by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with the objective of speedy development of road network and infrastructure in the northern and north-eastern border areas of India. A substantial part are General Staff (GS) roads, i.e., roads which primarily serve logistical needs of the defence forces and are funded by the Union Ministry of Surface Transport (MOST) budget while the others are roads of economic and strategic importance (assets of the states) constructed with non-MOST funds but within the purview of the BRO.

The importance of the road network in the north-east needs no emphasis. India is now raising the 17 Mountain Corps at Panagarh in West Bengal to augment its strategic strike capability vis-à-vis China. The BRO is the key instrument to realise the road network objective and provide the required logistical capability to this Corps. But is the BRO adequately attuned towards achieving this objective?

According to an official testifying in the Parliament on the 8th Report of the Standing Committee on Defence (2009-2010), "...two years back the philosophy of our nation was that we should not make roads as near to the border as possible. That philosophy is telling today very clearly as to why we do not have roads. It is only two or three years back that we suddenly decided a change of philosophy and said no, we must go as far forward as possible."¹ This Parliamentary Standing Committee Report had succinctly summed up the hiatus between the strategic needs of India and concomitant priorities and actual functioning of the BRO.

The Ministry of Defence had then indicated to the Committee that more funds would be allocated to the BRO and the organization was to be provided with adequate manpower.⁽²⁾ The fact, however, is that the BRO does not suffer from any resource constraint and also has an enabling organizational structure, with its functionaries having adequate

¹ Eighth Report of Standing Committee on Defence (2009-2010) presented to both Houses of Parliament of India on 19. 8. 2010.

administrative and financial powers. The BRO's expenditure on GS works has increased from Rs 830 crores in 2003-04 to Rs 2773 crores in 2012-13.² However, the BRO could spend Rs 2773 crores only in the last financial year of its budget (BE) allocation of Rs 3300 crores on GS works.³

The BRO project chief engineers execute their projects by engaging hired civilian labour in the construction companies. The availability of labour with the task forces and the construction companies is not an issue. The chief engineers have institutionally an internal financial advisory support element and are vested with full powers to decide on the labour rates. In other words, neither fund availability nor manpower resources may be deemed as constraints for the BRO in achieving its GS works targets. The apparent shortfall in the BRO's performance in relation to the logistical needs of the armed forces, is therefore, required to be carefully examined.

As a line organization, i.e., an organization which implements programmatic functions, the BRO has had a degree of autonomy in its administrative and financial matters. The availability of financial resources over the years has been substantial and incremental. At times there may have been less allocation of funds in the short-term, in relation to the estimates of the works planned for implementation but this, however, has to be viewed in the backdrop of an apparent disconnect between the formulation of annual plans of the BRO and its executing capability. Environmental constraints by way of local socio-political milieu-generated pressures and related governmental clearances have also occasionally militated against the BRO achieving its targets and security objectives. The above referred Parliamentary Standing Committee had observed that in 2010 the BRO was faced with a situation wherein, within its present capability, the planned quantum of GS works was beyond its executing capability. The present situation does seem to be much different. In this backdrop, there is a view in the higher echelons of Ministry of Defence that the BRO chief engineers of their projects take on the responsibility for executing other than GS works, i.e., works for other state governments, civil departments but only with prior administrative approval of the Centre. This will prevent the BRO from spreading its resources too thin and at the expense of the GS works/India-China Border Roads (ICBRs).

Without a focused approach and judicious prioritization, the BRO may not be able to achieve its Long-Term Perspective Plan-1, which involves the construction of 61 ICBRs (based on the India-China Study Group Report) involving a total road length of 3394 kilometers estimated at more than Rs 6500 crores. This would be to the detriment of India's security, particularly when a remote county, Medog in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has been recently connected by an all-weather road with Zhamag, a place bordering Arunachal Pradesh, with much fanfare.⁴

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

² Expenditure progress report of DGBR: 2013-14, October, 2013.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ China Daily, November 1, 2013.