

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO

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Woman power A women's contingent of Assam Rifles marching on the Rajpath in New Delhi during the 70th Republic Day parade. | Photo Credit: [Sandeep Saxena](#)

The Ministry of Home Affairs has proposed that the Assam Rifles should be merged with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and serve under the operational control of the MHA. At present, the Assam Rifles, a Central paramilitary force, is under the administrative control of the MHA and operational control of the Army, i.e. the Ministry of Defence. The Army is opposed to this proposal.

Formed as Cachar Levy in 1835 to assist the British rulers in maintaining peace in the Northeast, the Assam Rifles, which had just about 750 men, proved its capability and efficiency. This necessitated its expansion. The unit was converted into the Assam Military Police Battalion with two additional battalions in 1870. They were known as the Lushai Hills Battalion, Lakhimpur Battalion and Naga Hills Battalion. Just before World War I, another battalion, the Darrang Battalion, was added. They all rendered great service by assisting the British in Europe and West Asia during the war. These battalions were then renamed Assam Rifles. They continued to be regular armed police battalions, but with the 'Rifles' tag, which was a matter of honour for their competence, on par with any regular Army battalion.

It was after the Chinese aggression in 1962 in Arunachal Pradesh that the Assam Rifles battalions were placed under the operational control of the Army. Assam Rifles personnel who were acclimatised to the region were better suited for operations then. It needs to be remembered that one of the major causes for India's defeat was the fact that the regular Army units were not used to the extreme weather. The decision taken then was in keeping with the requirements. This is not the case any more.

All Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) are acclimatised to almost every region of the country now due to country-wide deployment of all CAPF battalions. The operational role performed by the ITBP at 18,700 feet in Ladakh is testimony enough to its capability to guard the border in any part of the country. It needs to be noted that back in 2001, the Group of Ministers had stated that the principle of 'One Border, One Force' should be strictly adhered to. If ITBP can guard the India-China border in Ladakh, there is no reason why it cannot guard the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh and beyond.

The concept of having two masters for an organisation — one for administrative control and another for operational control — is not only absurd but also leads to problems of coordination. Therefore, the Home Ministry's move to merge all its 55,000-strong Assam Rifles with the ITBP is a step in the right direction.

The Army argues that the Assam Rifles should be merged with it, to ensure national security. It requires no wisdom to conclude that the Army would lose its promotional avenues once this paramilitary force is merged with the ITBP, as it would be directly under the control of the Home Ministry. At present, nearly 80% of officers' ranks from Major upwards are held by Army officers on deputation. A Lieutenant General of the Army holds the post of Director General of Assam Rifles. It is natural for the Army to oppose the move.

For the time being, the Chief may be appointed from among IPS officers. But for the tussle between the IPS and the CAPF officers, consequent to the CAPF being brought under the fold

of Organised Group 'A' Service this year, it would be the direct officers of Assam Rifles who will eventually take up the top posts.

The Home Ministry, under Rajnath Singh, took up the issue of merger with the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). The matter is in the Delhi High Court now after retired personnel filed a petition saying they were facing difficulties in drawing pension because of dual control. The merger issue needs to be taken up on priority by the CCS so that doubts are cleared. The modalities of absorbing the officers should be worked out to stall any situation of a vacuum being created once the deputationists are repatriated to the Army.

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