

‘CHINA STRENGTHENING CONNECTIVITY IN CHUMBI’

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

China is strengthening connectivity and increasing its depth in Chumbi valley, close to India's strategic and vulnerable Siliguri corridor, also called Chicken's Neck, according to official sources. The area was recently termed "sensitive" by Lieutenant-General Manoj Pande, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Army Command.

In its just-released annual report 2021 to the U.S. Congress on military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Department of Defence (DoD) noted that despite the ongoing diplomatic and military dialogues to reduce border tensions, the PRC has "continued taking incremental and tactical actions to press its claims at the Line of Actual Control [LAC]".

"China is building an alternative axis in the Chumbi valley, which is close to the Siliguri corridor. They are increasing their depth by building roads through Bhutanese territory," an official source said. By this, it was securing its routes while putting pressure on the Siliguri corridor, which was vital for India, two officials independently stated.

Satellite images that came out last year had shown China building roads along the Torsa river area through Bhutanese territory. In this context, the recent memorandum of understanding (MoU) on a three-step road map between Bhutan and China to speed up their talks for boundary resolution was significant and could have implications for India, a third defence official said.

The Siliguri corridor is a stretch of land bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. At the narrowest, it is about 20-22 km.

In a recent conversation, Lt. Gen. Pande said the geostrategic significance of the corridor came about in terms of it being a narrow piece of land that connects the northeast to the rest of the country, through which major national highways, railway lines, pipelines, Off-Shore Cable (OFC) connectivity and the rest pass.

Lt. Gen. Pande said the other aspect was the demography and its dynamics in that area and "related challenges of radicalisation and separatist tendencies whose activities can be inimical to our security interest". "So, yes, the Siliguri corridor is sensitive to us," he said.

On the efforts to address this issue, he said they were looking at a "whole of the nation approach", wherein not only the security forces, the military and certain other Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), but also the Governments of the States around the Siliguri corridor and Central agencies were all working together in a coordinated manner to "mitigate this threat in normal times, the hybrid threat as and when it manifests as also during conflict conditions".

"Only recently, we have set up a joint coordinating centre under the Army and that has proved to be effective to coordinate actions of all agencies that work there," he said. He said at the national level, there was a thought process to look at alternative means in terms of economic activities, etc., to mitigate this threat to the Siliguri corridor.

PLA recruitment drive

The Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) had conducted a month-long recruitment drive in Chumbi valley of around 400 Tibetan persons in August, according to intelligence inputs. The aim was to

recruit at least one Tibetan aged 18-40 an household into the PLA militia, one official said, citing the inputs.

“The new recruits from Phari Dzong and Yatung will undergo one-year training at the PLA facilities in Lhasa,” the official disclosed. After the training, they were likely to be deployed on the India-China border, he added.

On China’s continued build-up along the LAC, the DoD annual report revealed: “Sometime in 2020, the PRC built a large 100-home civilian village inside disputed territory between the PRC’s Tibet Autonomous Region and India’s Arunachal Pradesh state in the eastern sector of the LAC.” Responding to questions on the Chinese “model villages” close to the LAC, Lt. Gen. Pande noted last month that the concern was the dual use, civil and military, of these villages.

The DoD report said Beijing, asserting that its deployments close to the LAC were in response to Indian provocation, had refused to withdraw any forces until India’s forces withdrew behind the PRC’s version of the LAC and ceased infrastructure improvements in the area.

As of June 2021, India and China continued to maintain large-scale deployments along the LAC, it stated.

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