

# 'CHINESE BUILD-UP IN RALP A MATTER OF CONCERN'

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Across the border: A file photo of a Chinese Army's patrolling car on the Chinese side at an altitude of 15,700 ft above the sea level near Arunachal Pradesh. Ritu Raj Konwar

While India has strengthened its defences as well as added offensive elements to its military posture in the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh, the massive Chinese infrastructure development and troop build-up in the Rest of Arunachal Pradesh (RALP) area is a matter of concern, and efforts are on by the Indian side to address it, according to several officers.

There has been an increase in Chinese patrols in the RALP, especially in the Asaphila area, along with massive development of infrastructure, at least two officers independently said. "They come for patrols and make a mess of the area. They leave stuff behind; in some instances, they had left tents and spades," one of the officers with the knowledge of the matter said. "They have built extensive road construction all across," the other officer noted.

## Two road axis

Other than the Kameng area, which consists of East and West Kameng districts, the rest of the State is referred to by the Army as the RALP.

India has two road axis in the forested RALP area in Lohit and Siang and now efforts are under way to improve infrastructure all across.

China is now moving troops closer to the LAC in RALP and this fits into a similar pattern across the entire Line of Actual Control (LAC), a third officer remarked. In addition to roads, there is construction of tunnels, habitat and related facilities to support the troops. For instance, construction of tunnels has been reported opposite the Subansiri area in recent months, the officer said, citing intelligence inputs.

In an interaction with a group of visiting journalists from Delhi in Tenga earlier this month, in response to questions on the situation in the Asaphila area, General Officer Commanding, Eastern Command, Lt. Gen. Manoj Pande, said: "We have observed build-up by China close to LAC essentially in terms of habitat and that has led to correspondingly more number of troops that are located there."

He noted that it was one of the areas on the LAC where the two sides had differing areas of perception. In terms of the number of patrols coming close to the LAC from the other side, there had only been a marginal increase vis-a-vis the "activities that were happening in the last couple of years", he said.

Last year, as the focus was on eastern Ladakh since the May stand-off, in addition to massive mobilisation and retasking of troops in Ladakh, the Army quietly reoriented troops in the eastern sector as well, against the backdrop of heightened Chinese activity across the LAC. Of the 3,488-km-long LAC, 1,346 km falls in the eastern sector.

## In Tawang sector

In the Tawang sector, there has been significant push to expand infrastructure that enabled faster troops reorientation, which is a shortfall in the RALP area, one of the officers cited above

said. Efforts were on by the Army and at the national level to speed up things, he stressed. The Army's Engineering Task Forces have been employed.

In terms of troops, till 2010, the Army had only one Division tasked for looking after RALP. With increased Chinese presence, the Army has since moved additional troops to strengthen its position.

The construction activity across the eastern sector has been synced to the changing weather patterns in the region.

For instance, in 4 Corps and 33 Corps area, the construction activity stops by September while in 3 Corps area, it begins after September.

To keep the momentum on infrastructure development going and enable long-term planning, the Army has proposed a five-year roll-on infra development plan instead of the current two-year plan, officials have stated.

### **1,600-km highway**

In a broader national effort, work is also under way on the 1,600-km Trans-Arunachal highway with the alignment running along the LAC up to the Myanmar border. The highway, which had been delayed, was now gathering pace, at least two officials said.

Union Minister Kiren Rijiju, who hails from Arunachal Pradesh, said on Facebook in March 2019 when he was the Minister of State for Home, that one of his biggest dream projects to connect the remote locations of Arunachal Pradesh was finally approved and a tender for the Detailed Project Report (DPR) was invited.

"The Trans-Arunachal highway, which was delayed due to land compensation issue is also settled now. The DPR for industrial corridor along the Arunachal-Assam border is also under progress," he had said.

Tendering for some parts of the project had since been done, officials added.

As reported by *The Hindu* recently, the Army has significantly augmented its firepower in the Tawang sector as well as strengthened its surveillance capabilities to keep an eye on Chinese activities across the LAC.

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