

# A Review of Roles: ITBP and Indian Coast Guard

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## Introduction

Examining the integration of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) with the future structures of India's Theatre Command system provides an opportunity to improve an important facet of national security. In essence, it involves two dimensions – Internal Security and Border Guarding including coastal areas. The nature and scale of threats across various borders are varied and coupled to the dynamics of their specific geopolitical and geoeconomic context. China and Pakistan represent the main threats which can also find combined expression. Much has changed since internal security, border guarding and coastal security were officially examined by a Group of Ministers as reflected in its Report in 2000 and the Naresh Chandra Committee in its Report in 2012.

The creation of Integrated Theatre Commands is a recent political mandate for the Chief of Defence Staff. There is no clarity on the final structure that will be adopted. There is talk of two Continental Theatre Commands and a singular Maritime Theatre Command. The Continental ones could be a Northern Theatre Command primarily covering land borders with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and a Western Theatre Command covering the land borders with Pakistan. The maritime space of the Indian Ocean Region and adjoining maritime spaces is supposedly the geographic reach of the Maritime Theatre Command. However, how the Indian hinterland will be distributed to these commands is still unknown. This article is limited to Sino-Indian border and coastal security

and examines the imperatives for change with respect to the ITBP and the Indian Coast Guard.

## **Sino-Indian Border**

### ***Problem Statement: ITBP***

The ITBP which guards an active and disputed border is essentially a police force in character. Their organisational characteristics are derived from the maintenance of public order based on the notion of border guarding. But in the case of the Sino-Indian border, the requirement is of “Border Defence”. For operational effectiveness, this requires greater militarisation of the force in terms of command and control, leadership, operational orientation and training, equipment and logistics.

### ***ITBP and Sino-Indian Border***

- **Axis of Enquiry:** The axis of examination is whether the ITBP is optimally positioned in its command and control, leadership, operational orientation, training, equipment and logistics for effective performance against the most likely major threats.
- **Old Arguments:** At the meta-level, till now, the argument was that ITBP must maintain its police heavy orientation, as the border was relatively peaceful and the various bilateral agreements in place did not warrant any change except in terms of improving the mechanisms for coordination with the Army. For obvious reasons, this line of argument can no longer hold water and the urgency for reform is obvious. The question is what should be the nature of change?
- **Nature of Change:** In conjunction with the Army, defending territorial integrity and prevention of Salami Slicing is the highest form of threat that should shape the role of ITBP. This suggests a shift towards militarisation and calls for a move away from its police character. The question which arises is whether such a shift requires the grouping of the ITBP under the MoD instead of the MHA. If done, such a shift will also resolve the problem of two ministries, simultaneously being responsible for overlapping functions that increase the complexity of managing a sensitive border from which different forms of military challenges are likely to manifest and that which will demand speedy and effective responses. On the other hand, the prevailing configuration of dual responsibility is a recipe for failure.

- **The Basic Shift:** Unless, this basic shift is done, all other measures undertaken to shift towards militarisation would prove half-baked and ineffective. The logic of a 'civilian' force manning the border during peacetime and brought under the operational control of the Army when mobilisation orders for war are issued is blind to the changing character of war and readiness for conflict. For nearly a decade, the state of relations with China is perpetual confrontation-crisis-conflict-back to confrontation. This has been described as No War No Peace (NWNP). That fact that during the ongoing crisis, the ITBP in Ladakh or anywhere else is not placed under the operational control of the Army, is a prime example of non-recognition of the character of the conflict. It is another matter, that during the crisis, the leadership of the Army and ITBP at the individual levels might have risen up to the occasion and achieved some degree of coordination. But reliance on the individual initiative is a risk that must be minimised if not obviated through institutional design.
- **Requirements of Border Defence:** Ideally, border defence requires a force that plays the role of a tripwire, with the Army formations moving in swiftly to the critical areas to respond to situations as warranted. This demands synergy and cannot possibly be met by the existing arrangements. Depending on terrain, in some areas, the elements of the Army may play the tripwire role. It is now inevitable that considerable accretions in manpower, firepower and other warfighting elements/materials will have to be managed and deployed on the Himalayan border. Since China as a strategy would like to draw India's resources towards its Northern border in an attempt to slow down India's growth as a maritime power, India must manage the additional requirements by rebalancing some forces from the Western border as also by utilising the ITBP battalions more effectively.
- **Army Linkage:** The ITBP has 54 battalions, most of which are deployed all along the Sino-Indian border from Karakoram Pass in Ladakh to Jechap-La in Arunachal Pradesh. The sheer span of deployment is indicative that such a force is better integrated on a permanent basis with the Army. The limited police duties the ITBP has to undertake can be made up by collocating local police with sub-units.
- **Organisational Changes:** The existing organisational characteristics of the ITBP will have to be transformed. The units must be organised like infantry battalions, led by military officers, equipped, trained and administered under the MoD. Conversion of ITBP battalions can be done by evolving a version of the war establishment that meets the operational requirements

of a tripwire force. Wherever applicable, a policy to maximise recruitment of local population can be adopted. This will serve to provide an element that is better adjusted to the terrain and also act as a bridge with the local population. Depending on operational judgement, some ITBP battalions can be converted and dovetailed into the existing configuration of Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh Scouts.

**Chinese threat requires militarisation of ITBP and shift from MHA to MoD for a speedy and effective response.**

- **Relief and Rotation:** The problem of relief and rotation which is extant now, is better addressed, if these battalions are part of the Army, as the units can be permanently deployed and personnel rotated from within the Army as is being done for the Rashtriya Rifles. The battalions can also be affiliated to various regiments. The entire force could be christened as Indo-Tibetan Border Rifles (ITBR) and the DG ITBR dovetailed into the HQ of the future Northern Theatre Command.
- **Intelligence and Communications:** A better intelligence and communications grid will be possible. Presently, variations in communication equipment inhibit communications at different levels. Intelligence sharing and flow which is a major weak point presently due to two ministries being involved will also be streamlined. It is now not uncommon that intelligence gained by ITBP/Army at the tactical levels sometimes flow via Delhi to tactical commanders on the ground.
- **Training:** Training for persons inducted to ITBR units must be organised under the respective Corps Battle Schools. Existing training establishments of the ITBP can be either merged with the Army institutions or disbanded as necessary. This will save considerable resources, as the ITBP has a vast network of training institutions from recruits training, officers training and specialised training in mountaineering and skiing.
- **Planning Process:** The entire planning process that includes long term force structure, modernisation, equipment commonality and the complete gamut of logistics support can be done comprehensively. It has not been uncommon for the ITBP to expand its force structure, plan for occupying additional posts without proper consultation with the Army. The energy expended on turf wars between ministries will be saved and resources usage significantly optimised.
- **Service Conditions:** The service conditions of personnel will have to adhere to those of the Army especially with regard to keeping a young age profile. This will inevitably increase, in the long run, the pension outgo of the

army. However, it can be tackled if the issue is addressed as part of a larger measure that involves the entire Army. Such a measure, christened as the Inverse Induction Model has been suggested by the Standing Committee on Defence as part of its 33<sup>rd</sup> Report to the Lok Sabha on Resettlement of Ex-Servicemen and later given operational shape in a Takshashila Discussion Document.

- **Logistics:** With the conversion of the ITBP battalions, logistics will be common with the Integrated Logistics framework of the Theatre Command System. This will obviate the existing duplication and save immense effort and resources. Overall, there would be considerable savings in manpower and material resources.
- **Transformation:**
  - o The transformation of the ITBP from a CAPF to a specialised version of the Army involves a major change in perspectives regarding strengthening the security dynamics of the Sino-Indian border. It has to be accompanied by several concomitant steps like infrastructure improvement, most of which are ongoing but requires to be hastened
  - o The decision to merge ITBP with the Army will have to be initiated at the level of the National Security Council through a paper that must originate from the National Security Council Secretariat. The National Security Advisory Board could also be tasked to study the issue and recommend changes. Recommendations must include the transition plan for conversion from a police force to the Army. Management of serving ITBP personnel will require crystallisation of several models which provide various options to migrate to other CPMFs or the Army. Migration to other CPMFs can also fill up the existing vacancies, which are substantial.
  - o Without doubt, such a merger will face tremendous institutional challenges that would test the political will of the leadership. The alternative is a status quo that is a recipe for an avoidable national security disaster.

## Coastal Defence

### ***Problem Statement: Indian Coast Guard (ICG)***

The NWP missions of ICG have a weighty civilian component that must be allowed to be fulfilled without interference from the Maritime Theatre Command. However, simultaneously, it must function in close cooperation in respect of force planning and security-related mission accomplishment.

## **ICG**

- **Axis of Enquiry:** Two questions regarding the ICG would arise when the Maritime Theatre Command is created. First, what should be the Command and Control relationship and second whether the Coast Guard should be brought under the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the MoD instead of the present arrangement of being under the Department of Defence (DoD).
- **Responsibilities:** Coastal Defence is the primary responsibility of the ICG irrespective of the strategic situation whether it is NWNP or war. Most of the duties in NWNP are civilian in nature, like surveillance, protection of fishermen, protection of the marine environment including pollution control, assisting the Customs Department in anti-smuggling activities, enforcement of maritime laws, assistance in case of disasters and collection of scientific data for use of the scientific community.
- **Relationship with Theatre Command:** The Maritime Theatre Commander, however, bears the overall responsibility for security in the entire maritime space. It is impractical and inadvisable to create a belt of responsibility around the Indian Coast and Island territories that is segregated and exclusive for the ICG. Also, several domains of responsibility of the ICG have overlapping security implications that are best dealt with through a command and control relationship that preserves the independence of the civilian functions while allowing for close security coordination.
- **Command and Control:** While it is easily accepted that during hostilities, the ICG must come under the operational control of the Maritime Theatre Command, the case during NWNP are not so straight forward. If in NWNP the ICG is placed under the operational control of the Maritime Theatre Command, it will tantamount to making it responsible and encumbering it with issues outside the security domain. These issues are not inconsiderable due to the scale and intensity of international and national civilian maritime activities.
- **Coordination:** The need exists for close coordination and putting in place suitable mechanisms at all levels to facilitate speedy communications and quick decision making. Such coordination mechanisms already exist but can be further strengthened.
- **Logistics & Maintenance:** The present separation of the ICG and IN has generated a separate system for logistics and maintenance that is amenable

**The command and control of Coast Guard must be promulgated before formation of the Maritime Theatre Command.**

to the merger with the creation of the Theatre Commands. The scope for the avoidance of duplication is immense and will certainly save considerable resources. This is better done if ICG is also placed under the DMA in the MoD.

- **Inter-Personal Linkages:** Strengthening inter-personal bonds through a flow of personnel between the IN and ICG at several levels must be adopted as given in the Takshashila Discussion Document mentioned earlier. The flow must extend to Coastal Police organisations that continue to struggle with the deficiency of persons with seafaring skill sets. The earlier practice of having a serving Admiral to head the ICG needs to be restored as it facilitated better coordination at the highest level. The present practice of the head of the ICG being from the Coast Guard Cadre has resulted in a shift towards bureaucratic control by the DoD in the MoD. In fact, this also brings to the fore whether ICG should be placed under the DMA instead of under the DOD.
- **Departmental Grouping: DoD or DMA?** If the DoD is essentially now a Department that is responsible for overall Defence policy and Acquisition, the DMA is responsible for the three Services which are the main military instruments, there is an obvious case for the ICG also to function under the DMA. With the CDS wearing the three hats of CDS, Secretary DMA and Permanent Chairman Chief of Staff Committee, the expertise for dealing with important maritime functions lies with the DMA and not the DoD. The merger of common functions will be easier to implement. Importantly, the need for close coordination in NWNP including force structure planning is better managed if placed under the DMA who is better positioned to view matters, holistically.

## **Conclusion**

The reforms suggested in the ITBP and ICG are despite and not as a result of the future establishment of the Theatre Command System. The regrouping and the change in the character of the ITBP is imperative that must not be allowed to fall prey to inter-ministerial turf battles. Instead, it must be seen as a necessary step to deal with the challenges that China is likely to generate in the northern land borders and the maritime space. All old arguments to maintain the status quo of ITBP have now been put to rest by China's strategic exertions and India should be prepared for more problems to arise. Even if disengagement and de-escalation of the present crisis take place, the need for change endures, as the geopolitical rivalry is likely to get intense, as long as the boundary dispute and the global geopolitical tensions endure.

The ICG changes are easier to bring about and can be done if the Defence Minister is convinced. The CDS is now well placed to make these happen. Ministerial and institutional egos coupled with narrow self-interests are the bane of the governmental machinery. Only a long term political vision can override the resistance to change even when there is a consensus that change is warranted. The catch always is that politicians are naturally inclined to the short term and given a chance would prefer to kick the can down the line. However, national interests cannot bear the weight of such natural proclivities of politics for delay and indecision. Hopefully, it should not be the lesson that somebody else will teach us to our detriment.

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