Countering the Chinese at Chumar

On July 17, the Cabinet Committee on Security sanctioned the creation of a Mountain Strike Corps for the Indian army. The corps is expected to be fully functional by the year 2020, and will be a long overdue addition to India’s border capability against China. It will, over the long term, also augment the development of defence infrastructure on India’s side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to mirror the enhanced infrastructure built by China on its side of the LAC; this equalisation of infrastructure will counter any advantage China may have.

Consolidating India’s border capabilities is imperative in the context of the increased incursions by China into Indian territory in recent years. Since 2005, troops of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have regularly intruded at Daulat Beg Oldie, Depsang and Demchok in the western sector of the LAC, as a tactic to not only to press territorial claims, but also to counter India’s infrastructure expansion. If the intrusions push Indian border posts back by even five kilometres, India will be unable to monitor Chinese movements.

India is especially focusing on Chumar in Ladakh, where the topography has put the PLA at a disadvantage compared to the Indian army. Here, Indian border posts overlook the Western Highway of China, which connects Tibet and Xinjiang, via the disputed Aksai Chin. Better infrastructure like forward bunkers, observation posts, and improved road and air connectivity, will give India a more decisive advantage.
As expected, China has objected to India’s plans. Instead, it has proposed a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), which will limit the number of troops and freeze infrastructure development by both countries. This is not what India wants, not after China has built infrastructure and increased its own troops. Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has conveyed objections on the BDCA to his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, during last month’s border negotiations in Beijing.

India must remain firm in its response to Chinese activities by undertaking additional patrolling and stepping up the pace of infrastructure development. Critical gaps, particularly at unmanned points on the LAC, can additionally be plugged by deploying mobile surveillance systems and unattended ground sensors.

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