

Assam Rifles, A Reality Check

Background

Assam Rifles is the oldest Para Military Force which was raised in 1835. It is often referred as the “Friends of the Hill People” and the “Sentinels of the North East”. The Force came into being as a militia called the Cachar Levy. The initial strength was just 750 personnel, which was deployed in the area of Assam where the British had their tea gardens. They protected them from tribal raids and did a creditable job.^[1] Gradually they were needed for offensive expedition across the border of Assam. This led to their reorganisation and the Force was re-christened as the Frontier Force. The Force grew qualitatively and quantitatively, They were instrumental in opening the region to administration and commerce which made them popular as the right arm of the civil and left arm of the military. Thirty five years hence the Forces were converted to three Assam Military Police battalions named as Lushai Hills, Lakhimpur and Naga Hills Battalions. Prior to World War I, fourth battalion named, the Darang Battalion was raised. World War I needed additional soldiers and this proved to be a turning point for the force. 3000 personnel of this Force were sent to Europe and the Middle East. They fought shoulder to shoulder with Rifle Regiments of the Regular British Army and this resulted in them being renamed as the Assam Rifles. Though a Para Military Force, the combat skills of the personnel of this regiment are second to none.

Force activities Post Independence

Assam Rifles proved its combat capabilities after we became independent. As a part of the policy adopted for the North East Frontier Agency, the organisation functioned under the Ministry of External Affairs. The units of the Force took part in conventional operations during the Sino Indian conflict of 1962. It was placed under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in 1965 for administrative control, with Army retaining the operational authority. Thereafter, the Force participated as part of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987 as a part of Op Pawan. This was followed by Counter insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir for a short period of almost eight years in 1990. It also undertakes joint operations to include coordinated patrolling with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army).^[2] In all these operational commitments, the Assam Rifles battalions acquitted themselves in an outstanding manner’ and a large number of them were awarded the Chief of the Army Staff’s or the Army Commanders’ Unit Citations for their performance.

Currently, the Assam Rifles has an approx. strength of over 65,000 soldiers and the Force has been divided into 46 battalions and various support units and establishments. The Force also has a Training Centre, which was recently declared as the Best Training Institute in the Constable Category by the Ministry of Home Affairs. and a number of logistics units. It not only trains the recruits of Assam Rifles, but also recruits and trained troops of some of the other CAPFs and State Police Forces. In fact, the Assam Rifles Commando Platoon trained by the Regimental Centre, won the All India Police Commando Competition in Jan 2019 wherein 22 Teams from NSG, CAPFs and State Police participated. The Force has played a great stellar role in integrating the tribal population with mainstream India. The Force is now affectionately called “Friends of the North East People”. It is pertinent to note that the force Assam Rifles as a Para Military Force and boasts of having won four Ashok Chakras, the highest peace time Gallantry Award. from the Government of India. The battalions of Assam Rifles are organised is mandated to perform two roles namely, for guarding of the Indo Myanmar border as the primary role, and to undertake tasks pertaining to Counter Insurgency as its secondary role since there is an overlap in these

responsibilities because of the nature of Indo-Myanmar Border. Unlike our western borders, this border is porous and unfenced except for a mere three kilometer of fenced portion.

Current Report of Possible Merger

On 15 September 2019 it was reported in certain newspapers that the Government is working on a plan to divest the Indian Army of operational control over Assam Rifles and is likely to merge it with Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) which guards borders along China.^[3]

The issue can be traced back to the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee which was endorsed by a Group of Ministers. Accordingly, in 2009 a Draft Note was placed before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for implementing the proposal of One Border One Force. There were numerous drafts and the issue came to a near settlement in 2014 when Army almost gave operational clearance to Border Security Force (BSF) for manning 1643 km of Indo- Myanmar Border. The proposal meandered along and over a period of time turned dormant. The last proposal came up in 2017 which recommended creation of a separate Indo-Myanmar Border Guarding Force with 25 Assam Rifles Battalions to be linked to ITBP. The remaining 21 Battalions were to be left with the Army for CI tasks. However, it is pertinent to note that 80 percent of the officer cadre of Assam Rifles comes from the Indian Army right from the top hierarchy to the junior leadership which actually executes the Border Management charter and Counter Insurgency & Counter Terrorist operations; the latter quintessentially being the domain of small team operations and entails leading the men by personal example. . The Army, thus, has great affinity to the Assam Rifles and despite the current efforts by the Home Ministry cannot be easily separated from Assam Rifles, without of course, overlooking the National Security dimensions.

In the context of Border Management, it is important to note different dynamics of land borders which India shares with Myanmar are different that those with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Myanmar Border is 1643 km long and includes border between four Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The terrain is thickly forested with hills and numerous water bodies. Operating on this border requires special skills of in terms of knowing language and customs which takes decades to master. Further, people in this region are extremely emotional and sensitive, and therefore need to be handled with care. It is not assertive policing that helps in this region, but and therefore the connect with the populace that the Assam Rifles with control of and the Indian Army has developed over all these decades, in fact over almost two centuries, that helps in accomplishment of Border management and CI/CT responsibilities. It is a tried and tested solution which would be incorrect to tamper with. This issue is difficult to comprehend and the Home Ministry is possibly looking at this aspect as a Cadre Management issue, first trying with the BSF and then with the ITBP. This being an open, porous, and at places, contested border laced with tribal affinity and cultural connect sans border, needs deft handling. Therefore, the fully established, harmonious and synergistic application of Assam Rifles on the Indo Myanmar Border in total sync and harmony with Army should not be tinkered and toyed with lest it adversely manifests into National Security challenges in the North east, which, after a long time, is showing signs of return of peace and prosperity. having one force to look after is extremely difficult and not in the interest of security.

Other Aspects

The proposed merger of Assam Rifles with ITBP would need introspection in the backdrop of certain other aspects also. Some of these are elucidated below:-

- ITBP is a Central Armed Police Force whereas Assam Rifles is a Para Military Force with a military ethos. It is difficult to integrate forces whose ethos is at a variance particularly in combat situations. This has to be viewed in conjunction with the terrain of Assam.
- Assam Rifles is the soul of the North Eastern part of the country. We have to be extremely cautious while proposing aspects that will tinker with the soul and possibly impact the Act East policy. This is the region that we have to use as a pivot to promote our soft power. We are already looking forward to a road, as also a rail line, to Vietnam from the North East. Any action that alters the stability in this region will not serve the country's national interest.
- Assam Rifles and ITBP are governed by different Acts and Statutory provisions. In the case of a Force with a military ethos change of Act will lead to dilution of rules degrading the organisational efficiency of the Force.
- The command and control structure of both the Forces are different. The moot point is, do they continue or change their basic structure.
- The formation of an integrated force may impact the operational efficiency of the ITBP, Assam Rifles and finally the Indian Army.
- The point that the ITBP soldier would be moved from the mountainous regions of the Himalayas to a softer place in the North East for rest and recoup as a peace profile defies logic since patrolling the dense forests of the Indo-Myanmar Border amidst adverse weather and under developed terrain and infrastructure, as also the challenging Counter Insurgency environment can never provide succor and relief to the ITBP soldier. The statement is factually not correct and needs examination.

Way Ahead

The issue is extremely important and needs serious consideration before taking any decision measures which impacts the security of the North Eastern region. It is recommended that the matter be re-examined comprehensively and a balanced decision be taken, placing national security as the principal focus. In such considerations, we should be driven by the maxim, 'National Outlook for National Security'.

References

^[1] "Sentinels of The North East, History of Assam Rifles: 183 years of Glory and sacrifice." www.assamrifles.gov.in, Accessed on October 02, 2019.

^[2] Lieutenant General K J Singh, "Ain't broke? Don't fix: Assam Rifles delivers beyond expectations". www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, September 29, 2019.

^[3] "Assam Rifles may soon be merged with ITBP", The Tribune, www.tribuneindia.com, September 15, 2019.