

Security Challenges at the North-Western Borders of India

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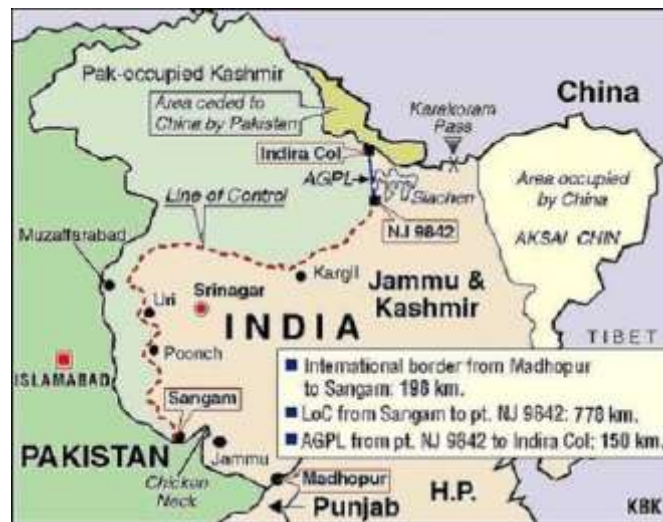
Abstract:

Several developments along the Indo-Chinese border in the North-Eastern front of India have created a crisis for the traditionally vulnerable North-Western front of India. The illegal usurpations of Indian territory by Pakistan and China have brought forth a situation today which is detrimental to the security and sovereignty of India. The present study opens up with the historical threats along the Western borders of India and moves forward with the effects of illegal occupation of the North-Western border towns by Pakistan and then by China. The paper determines the major new-generational challenges to the defence of India and how prepared India is to deal with the threat. The use of technology and Artificial Intelligence by the Indian adversaries have also been discussed.

Keywords: Security, Ladakh, Kargil, Pakistan, China, Gilgit

The challenges of security along the borders of India have been manifesting in different forms. In the recent past, the defence of the country is claiming more time, capital and attention than ever. With advancing technology and migration of certain populations, the security threats are assuming complexity in contemporary times.

Since the partition of India, the north-western part of the divided sub-continent has seen unparalleled migration, disturbances and casualties. Today, the Line of Control of India, is one of the most vulnerable spots for this threat. It is one of the three divisions into which the north-western periphery of India has been spread out. The first division is the Radcliffe Line drawn in 1947, which is today also the International Border of India, running from Gujarat to Jammu at Akhnoor. The next stretch of the border is the Line of Control, extending up to Ladakh. This was actually the Line of Ceasefire, initially drawn after the India-Pakistan war of 1947 and modified once after the Indian victory in the India-Pakistan war of 1971. Next division is the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) stretching from Ladakh to Indira Col in a mountainous pass at the Siachen glacier. It is the AGPL that separates the Indian and Pakistani troops at the Siachen region and the disputed territory. It is at the trijunction area of India, China and Pakistan.¹



Divisions of the Indian North-Western Frontierⁱⁱ

Temperature here, falls as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius and snow up to thirty-five feet is an average condition every winter. In this polar environment, the troops have been stationed at permanent postings, that is, that even during the winters, the military posts at the Siachen and entire Kargil front cannot be vacated. These conditions have been necessitated by the Kargil invasion of Pakistan in 1999. Also, the northern side of the Indira Col, legally belonging to India, has been occupied by the Chinese forces since an agreement with Pakistan in 1963. This part is the Shaksgam valley, a region of the Hunza territory under the Dogra rulers till the twentieth century. Therefore, the large military presence at the AGPL as well as the LoC has been the need of the Indian defence system. The immediate neighbourhood of India is infested with troublemaker polities that have little regard for international boundaries and resolutions. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) runs along this zone. The massive Chinese presence in the strategic trans Karakoram zone of India, has been generating adverse consequences for India. The Siachen zone is so strategic that it links Leh with Gilgit and is overlooking the entire Gilgit Baltistan region which legally belongs to India.



Strategic zones of the North-Western front of India with respect to illegal occupation by Pakistan and Chinaⁱⁱⁱ

Here, India is threatened with its traditional enemy Pakistan and more dynamic challenges brought forth by China- the rival adjusted into the territory by Pakistan. Recently, the four year long standoff with China over the Galwan issue was resolved on 21 October, 2024. However, within days, China announced the reorganisation of her military theatres. The Western theatre Command, among all the five Chinese theatre commands, overlooks the entire Indian border from the East to the North West of India.^{iv}

As a response to this development, the Government of India has sped up the plan of deploying Integrated Battle Groups (IBG), along the border, by 2025. Each IBG is supposed to be comprising of five to six thousand soldiers and led by a two-star General. The IBG has been trained for high altitude operations and is supposed to combat the Combined Armed Brigades (CAB) of China as well.

However, India has a challenge of mustering large number of troops for her long border. China has targeted the Eastern border of Ladakh. With the use of its CAB and the reorganised theatre command, the Chinese Army will be amplifying response by joining the air and land attack. One cannot underestimate the extent of the attack to be limited at the Eastern border only. The North-Western border along the Kargil sector may fall as much a victim to the adverse impact of the Western theatre Command of the PLA. The Chinese do have the advantage of air defence, large and advance infantry with the logistical strength.

The number of Indian troops stationed at the North West border has been rather less as far as the security demand is concerned. In 2024, the Chief of Defence Staff, Anil Chauhan has reiterated the need of strengthening the Indian defence in this region. He said that the proxy war which is being waged by Pakistan today, as well as the security challenge with China are the two most significant threat that India is facing currently.^v

According to a report, there have been civilian casualties up to 15000 from 1985 to 2024 in Jammu and Kashmir; added to this is the number of Indian army soldiers killed in action which is 7000.^{vi} A majority of internal security challenge comes from those terrorist groups which are being constantly trained by the ISI in Pakistan, though, they reside in Kashmir. Time and again, arms support of China to Pakistan has been proven in recovery of ammunition from the terrorists inside Kashmir. A Government report shows certain decline in deaths of innocent individuals as well as security personnels. However, the trend needs to be eliminated altogether to reinforce the North-Western borders of India.

Description	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Terrorist initiated incidents	153	126	129	125	46
Encounters/ Counter Terrorism Operations	102	118	100	117	48
Civilians killed in terrorist initiated incidents and in encounters	44	38	41	31	14
Security personnel killed	80	63	42	32	30
Terrorist killed	157	221	180	187	73

Source CID, Jammu and Kashmir UT^{vii}

The length of the border shared with Pakistan is 1222 kilometres, excluding the AGPL which is approximately 110 kilometres. Any attempt of a combined military offensive of China and Pakistan on the

North-Western front of India will demand a large cluster of infantry troops as well as air defence to be stationed at Leh and Kargil against an unforeseen transgression. A 2024 report from the Pentagon USA reiterates that through her Western theatre Command, China is prioritising the security of its frontier with India. The above discussion has shown that the Chinese frontier extends to the Karakoram as well as Gilgit region in the North-West of India. The Pentagon has also said that the bulk of Chinese Combined Armed Groups remain stationed at the border with India.^{viii}

In addition to the above, the increasing threat of new generation challenges is also targeting the North-Western borders of the country. Through Pakistan, many new devices of surveillance and attack are being launched into India. The use of robotics, transparent cameras and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) like drones have become the new age tools of continuing the proxy war from Pakistan. Not only the devices but the development of new technology to disable enemy's digital defence system is a much bigger security challenge. The use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons on the battlefields is raising as much alarm as the strategic weapons designed to destroy cities. The Tactical nuclear weapons can be set against specific targets and can also be used to generate impulse to render astray the working of the digital defence system in its operational zone. These bombs can be made mobile by mounting on carriers like trucks, tanks and even missiles or can also be dropped from the air by jets.

The United States of America has raised concerns that Pakistan deploying the Nuclear Tactical Weapons raise the risk of escalation for nuclear use in case of a military conflict with India. "Over the past decade-and-a-half, the US assessment of nuclear weapons security in Pakistan appears to have changed considerably from confidence to concern, particularly because of the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons"^{ix} How thoroughly the Pakistan Army has made preparations directing their nuclear technology towards India can be gauged, from the speech made by an advisor to the Pakistani National Command Authority, Lt. Gen (Retd.) Khalid Kidwai at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, in May 2023, which states:

- "That Pakistan possesses the full spectrum of nuclear weapons in three categories: strategic, operational and tactical, with full range coverage of the large Indian land mass and its outlying territories; there is no place for India's strategic weapons to hide.
- That Pakistan possesses an entire range of weapons yield coverage in terms of kilotons (KT), and the numbers strongly secured, to deter the adversary's declared policy of massive retaliation; Pakistan's "counter-massive retaliation" can therefore be as severe if not more.
- That Pakistan retains the liberty of choosing from a full spectrum of targets in a "target-rich India," notwithstanding the indigenous Indian BMD or the Russian S-400, to include counter value, counter force and battlefield targets."^x

The above stated person, Khalid Kidwai, served as the Director General of the Strategic Plans Division of Pakistan. As such his information on the number and strike range of the nuclear weapons against India should not be discarded. Although, the nuclear power of India is much bigger than Pakistan's yet the historical lessons suffered by India at her north-western border must not be recalled while planning the defence of the frontier.

The Pakistani Army controls the government and the assets of Pakistan. It rests its existence on a single propaganda policy that India wants to undo the partition of 1947 and is the biggest threat to her survival. It has a history of taking unmindful decisions of poor tact-- gathering forces in the name of Jihad and invading the western border towns of Jammu-Kashmir-Ladakh wielding newly granted advanced weaponry, backed by an imperialist foreign power. The conditions have not changed in 2025, except today

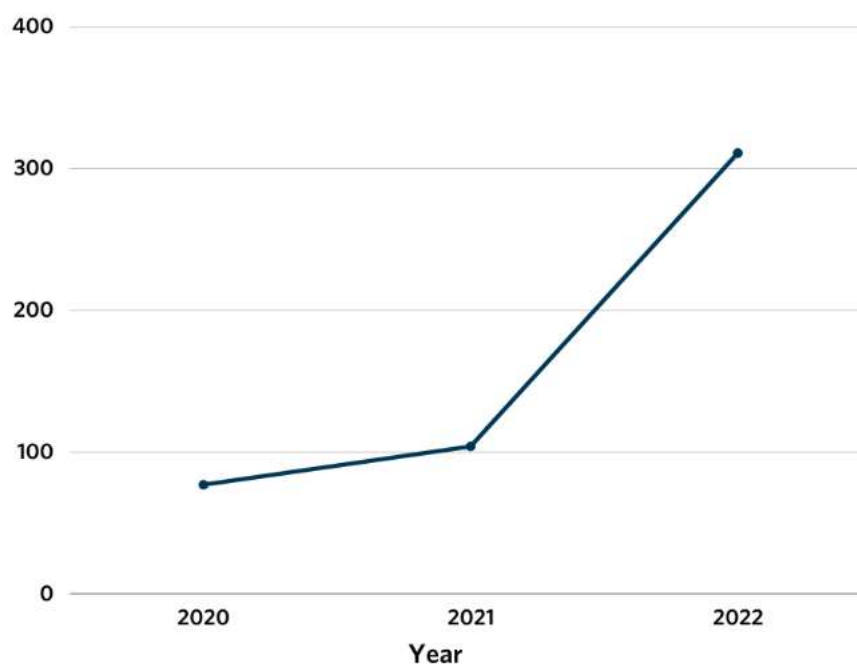
it is backed by China-another imperialist power. They attack in an unprovoked situation and claim hundreds of innocent lives of the Indian inhabitants. Taking into account the historical pattern, the Indian defence on the North-Western border needs to be structured on the lines of preventing the haphazard and impulsive attacks from her unfriendly neighbour.

Even the US Presidents have raised concerns over the possession of nuclear weapons by Pakistan. The Barack Obama administration cleared that it was worried over the use of Battlefield nuclear weapons by Pakistan, as managing such weaponry in the field is much less secure.

Technology is being exploited by anti-national miscreants and terrorists in a detrimental way- for carrying out surveillance, attacks and logistical support across the border into India. The Director General of Border Security Force has informed recently that they have been heavily “bombarded” with drones from Pakistan at the Western border of India and the onslaught of the drones bringing ammunition and drugs has doubled in 2022.^{xi} The North-Western front, in particular, has become the target for supplying ammunition as well as narcotics for terror funding in India. The situation of superimposed borders in Jammu and Kashmir has been specifically advantageous to the terrorists for perpetrating their evil designs of infiltration and use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).

The BSF is constantly updating its anti-drone guns as well as laser equipped detection technology for the UAVs. The force has also been empowered by the Central government since October 2021, to conduct searches and operations of seizures and make arrests up to fifty kilometres of the International Border.^{xii}

Graph 1: Drone Sightings Along India-Pakistan International Border



Rising trend of drones up to 2022^{xiii}

The strain on the Indian sources and force for the Eastern Ladakh Sector has been increasing since the unfortunate Galwan incident took place. In this situation, the Western sector of Ladakh, that is India’s North-West has been facing several issues of its own that can compromise the security of India. China being an aggressive player in the zone has been spreading in an imperialistic fashion, taking advantage of the weaker Pakistani position. The greater presence of Chinese troops in Hunza, Khunjerab and other

points of Gilgit-Baltistan add to the existing threat posed by Pakistan. As such, there is the need of a bigger Indian military presence at this front. The number of troops along the border needs to be increased considerably so as to man the low points or the less elevated spots on the Indian side, in addition to the strategic heights, now permanently held. Moreover, the need of thermal infrastructure needs to be provided before more troops can be added at the border. The exploitation of the existing geo-thermal fields in Ladakh needs to be started as well as better means of transportation and communication need to be provided at the far-flung frontier. These facilities and thermal infrastructure is being provided by China to her troops of the Western theatre command. Many new villages with thermal built-up are being established to strengthen Chinese presence along India's borders. Therefore, India needs to take up the strengthening of the borders in an equally assertive manner. Needless to say, the strengthening of the local economy and telecom infrastructure will play a crucial role for this purpose. The emigration of people from the border villages of Ladakh in search of livelihood needs to be stopped so that the problem of abandoned villages is curbed along the North-Western borders. Providing aid for building infrastructure to enhance agricultural capability, solar power generation, water harnessing can be the steps to reinforce the north-Western borders of India.

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