

## **The danger from China's border infrastructure**

Amit Kumar  
4<sup>TH</sup> March 2010

Eyes on strategic as well as economic gains, China is making all endeavours to build networks of rail and road links along Sino-India frontier and beyond. Besides the economic benefits, this colossal border infrastructure build-up makes it possible for Beijing to gather a huge number of troops at the border in double -quick time, whenever it needs. In contrast, Indian troops have to struggle with sloppy infrastructure to reach at the border.

Over the years, China has built an envious network of road and rail links along the border while napping India failed to comprehend the significance of border connectivity. Now with the change in policy in recent years, New Delhi is floundering to execute its own relatively modest plans to match the Chinese moves.<sup>1</sup> India's recent declaration to upgrade the road infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh and develop the rail connectivity between Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh has been conceived as an effort to go with the Chinese.

China is way ahead to India on infrastructure development along the border. As China is reaching its railway almost near Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim border, India is struggling to locate Gangtok and Itanagar in Indian Railways map. Chinese frontier city Nyingchi (near Arunachal border) is expected to link with main land through Chinese railway network while all Indian frontier cities along the Sino-India border are still bereft of rail links. In Middle Himalaya, after linking Lhasa with Kathmandu by road, Chinese rail is knocking at Sino-Nepal border. Contrary to it, most of the India -Nepal Railway projects are not even pushed beyond the feasibility studies. On western front, China has already built strategic Karakoram road and now planning to construct rail network across the inaccessible Karakoram whereas India is still waiting to connect Srinagar to rest of the nation by rail.

### **Karakoram Highway: Strategic and Economic Gains for China**

India's loss of strategic segments of high Himalayas and part of Karakoram to Pakistan and China in 1947-48 put China and Pakistan into advantageous position in the region. And later on, both augmented the strategic gains by opening of Karakoram Highway (KKH). The KKH, not far from the Line of Control (LoC), is strategically key asset for the China and Pakistan. This highway along with the Chinese road running in Aksai Chin provides major avenues of collaboration against Indian by troops of all weather friends 'China' and 'Pakistan'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rajat Pandit, *China way ahead on border infrastructure*, The Economic Times, 19 January 2009.

The KKH, the highest paved international road in the world, was completed in 1986 after 20 years of rigorous efforts. The highway, connecting the Northern Areas of Pakistan to the ancient Silk Road, runs approximately 1,300 km from Kashgar - a city in the Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang - to Havelian, located in the Abbottabad District of Pakistan. An extension of the highway meets the old Grand Trunk Road at Hasan Abdal, about 40 km northwest of Islamabad. Now, the Chinese are heavily engaged in the upgrading of Karakoram Highway, from the existing 10 meters width to 30 meters to allow heavier vehicles to pass throughout the year.

The Highway passes through the confluence zone of Asian and Indian subcontinents where the Pamir, Kunlun, Hindukush, Karakoram and Great Himalaya ranges are knotted together and China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India all come within 250km of each other can also serve as a link between China and the Central Asian states.

China and Pakistan are also planning to connect strategic Gwadar port with the broadened Karakoram Highways. The link is intended to enhance Chinese economic influence in Central Asia and West Asian region as well as strategic access to the People's Liberation Army in politically sensitive areas. In near future, the link would act as land-locked and resource-rich Central Asia's gateway to the outside world as the newly constructed dry port at Sost on Karakoram Highway has the potential to act as a channel of trade for Central Asian countries. China-built Gwadar port close to the strategic 'Straits of Hormuz' will be the entry point for energy supplies to China, bypassing the Malacca Straits. Linking Western China with the Arabian Sea means China's strategic reach to the Indian Ocean as well as greater economic benefits to Xinjiang province.

Moreover, the highway has also been emerged as 'highway of nuclear and missile proliferation'. Some years back, American satellites detected the movement of 12 consignments of Chinese missiles to Pakistan via Karakoram highway.<sup>2</sup> The silkworm missiles that China got in trouble for selling to Pakistan came only through Karakoram route, whose bridges are reconstructed to handle heavy freights.<sup>3</sup> Also, North Korea received Uranium enrichment equipment from the A Q Khan network through this route only.<sup>4</sup>

India seems to be apprehensive as Chinese intend to establish strategic link-up with Pakistan in parts of Jammu and Kashmir under occupation by both the countries, saying this could have direct military implications. The Defence Ministry's Annual Report for

---

<sup>2</sup>Pak-Iran nuclear nexus : UN confirmation, *India News Online*, 1 September 2003, available at <http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:2gpAqLjg5LMJ:news.indiamart.com/news-analysis/pak-iran-nuclear-nex-874.html+Karakoram+highway,+Missile,+proliferation&cd=11&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in>

<sup>3</sup> Karakoram Highway In China, available at <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=441&catid=15&subcatid=104>

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bond, *The Proliferation Security Initiatives: Targeting Iran and North Korea*, Occasional Paper on International Security Policy, Number 53, January 2003, British American Security Council.

2008-09 tabled in Rajya Sabha last year noted with concern the possibility of China's growing connectivity with Pakistan through the territory in Jammu and Kashmir, illegally occupied by both these nations.<sup>5</sup>

While China begun the infrastructural development programme across the Trans Himalaya and Karakoram range programme many years ago, India took some initiatives to connect Himalayan border to the mainland in recent years only. New Delhi's recent decisions to develop border infrastructure like; building a more reliable second approach to Ladakh with the upgrading the Manali-Leh road and construction of Rohtang tunnel, and development of railway networks in border areas of Jammu & Kashmir and linking it with other part of the nation, indicates that it intends to improve transport network along its borders with China in the region.

Aiming the round-the-year lines of communication to eastern Ladakh, the Cabinet Committee (CCS) recently approved the pending proposal of building an 8.8-km-long Rohtang tunnel. The proposal was waiting for approval from CCS since 2002. At present, due to heavy snowfall at the Rohtang Pass (13,050 feet), the road connectivity for Leh from Himachal Pradesh remains disrupted during winter season. Since another link road to Leh - Srinagar-Leh road- is vulnerable to Pakistani shelling, as was witnessed during the Kargil conflict, an alternative route to Leh and eastern Ladakh for military as well as civilian purpose is obligatory.

Moreover, New Delhi is also looking ahead to set off a new railway project to link Ladakh region with rest of the India. The strategic rail link is proposed between Leh and Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh. Six passenger trains and nine goods trains are planned on the 498 km-long section.<sup>6</sup> According to some recent reports, the Indian Railways has already completed a reconnaissance survey of this ambitious rail link. The project has been conceived as an effort to counterbalance China's strategic advantage along the Sino-Indian border.

In addition, India also got the success to make its military presence along the Chinese border in Ladakh. Following the strategy to build communication infrastructure on the Chinese border, the Indian Air Force has successfully converted one of its old landing grounds in Ladakh, in the vicinity of the Sino-Indian border, into an operational airstrip where military transport planes can land.

India is also on mission to complete one of its most challenging railway projects by construct a rail tracks to connect valley of Kashmir with the Himalayan foothills. The idea of bringing organised transport to the Kashmir Valley is nothing new but the ambitious Kashmir railway project initiated after declaring it as National Priority Project

---

<sup>5</sup> India wary of Sino-Pak strategic link-up in occupied Kashmir, *Indian Express*, 12 July, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> India to build rail line to Ladakh, *Times of India*, 26 April 2009, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/india/India-to-build-rail-line-to-Ladakh/articleshow/4450628.cms>

in 2001. Though the rail link was planned to be fully opened in 2009, all that has been opened so far is the section in the flat terrain of the Kashmir. Quite the opposite, China finished a similar high-altitude railway line (Golmud - Lhasa) in adjacent Tibet in the remarkably short period of five years. It commenced work on the 1142 km Golmud - Lhasa rail route in 2001, just as India ordered faster work on the Kashmir railway, and inaugurated the track on July 01, 2006.

### **Trans Karakoram Railway: Connecting Gwadar and Chahbhar**

While Indian Railway is facing hitches in building the rail link between the Srinagar valley and the rest of the nation, China is about to commence its own rail line to the parts of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistan's control.<sup>7</sup> Islamabad has already awarded a contract of US \$ 1.2 billion to an international consortium to carry out a feasibility study for this ambitious rail project. The Pakistan-China rail link is intended to connect Havelian, the northern limit of Pakistan's railways, to the Kasghar of China's Xin Xiang region via Northern Areas of Jammu and Kashmir. The proposed rail link is expected to roughly follow the Karakoram Highway route.

It is noteworthy that by extending its East-West Railway from the Chinese border town of Kashi to Peshawar in Pakistan's northwest region, Beijing can receive cargo to and from Gwadar along the shortest route, from Karachi to Peshawar.<sup>8</sup> This rail link could be used not only for trade purposes but also to transport energy from the Persian Gulf to Xinjiang, in case a pipeline is not a viable option. Pakistan's existing rail link is also enabling China to get rail access to Iran. The only problem is difference in rail gauge. There is possibility of Chinese involvement in construction of a rail link from the north-western city of Mashhad along Iran's eastern border to the port of Chabahar. According to a recent report, Tehran is in negotiations with two Chinese companies to build a 1,100 kilometers long railway in eastern Iran to connect Mashhad with Chabahar.<sup>9</sup>

Besides roads and rail links, Beijing and Islamabad are ready to construct oil and gas pipeline across Karakoram to connect Gwadar to land-locked Xinjiang. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has already been signed with Pakistan for the feasibility study to build the energy corridor to China. According to a newspaper report, a Chinese state firm is examining building a pipeline to carry Gulf oil from Gwadar to western China. This route will not only cut freight costs and supply time but also help China to bypass

---

<sup>7</sup>C. Raja Mohan, Rail rivalry in Kashmir, Indian Express, 10 November 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Pakistan Railways, From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, available at [http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:\\_B\\_QV1wx3FYJ:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan\\_Railways+East+West+Railway+from+the+Chinese+border+town+of+Kashi+to+Peshawar+in+Pakistan%27s&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in](http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:_B_QV1wx3FYJ:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan_Railways+East+West+Railway+from+the+Chinese+border+town+of+Kashi+to+Peshawar+in+Pakistan%27s&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in)

<sup>9</sup> Chinese may build railway line from Mashhad to Chabahar, 10 September 2009, available at [http://steelguru.com/news/index/2009/09/10/MTExMDY4/Chinese\\_may\\_build\\_railway\\_line\\_from\\_Mashhad\\_to\\_Chabahar.html](http://steelguru.com/news/index/2009/09/10/MTExMDY4/Chinese_may_build_railway_line_from_Mashhad_to_Chabahar.html)

Malacca Straits. Chinese government is also planning to construct oil-refining and storage facilities at the Gwadar.

### **Train to Nepal**

China has already instigated the construction of a rail network connecting Tibetan capital of Lhasa with the market town of Khasa on the Sino-Nepal border. The 770 km proposed Lhasa–Khasa rail link is an extension of the world’s highest railway, which runs between Golmund, a city in China’s Quinghai province and Lhasa . The project, planned to be completed by 2013, is expected to follow Lhasa- Kathmandu Friendship Highway route. The proposed rail link, a Chinese scheme to improve its transport infrastructure in isolated Himalayan region, is likely to strengthen Nepal's strategic and economic engagement with China and reduce its dependence on old traditional friend ‘India’<sup>10</sup>. Chinese plans are not limited to railways but include the plans for six additional highways to link up with Nepal, the development of cross -border energy pipelines and optical fibre.

Anxious to Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects in Nepal, India has recently launched a Rs-1,700 crore road-and-rail infrastructure initiative in the terai region of the Himalayan country. India is thinking over expanding its rail links with Nepal through at least five technically and financially feasible routes: Nautanwa -Bhairahawa, Nepalgunj Road-Nepalgunj, Jogbani-Biratnagar, New Jalpaiguri-Kakarbhitta and Jayanagar-Bardibas. Currently, there is one rail link between the two countries that connects Raxaul (India) with container inland port at Birganj (Nepal). India does plan to expand the existing rail link up to Kathmandu. A train from Birganj to Kathmandu that cuts through the mountains will be a mere 80 km, cutting travel time and costs .<sup>11</sup> At present Birganj is connected to Kathmandu by road only and distance between the cities is about 261 Km.

India worries that building an extensive transport network along Nepal’s northern borders and other ambitious plans to develop road and rail network in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar will help China making inroads into South Asia, posing a threat to India’s security and economy. And, that is expected to happen if Delhi fails to develop its own transport network in the border area to compete the Chinese<sup>12</sup>. New Delhi also needs to initiate the pending proposal for construction of a transnational network to put Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in its railway network. According to a news paper report “India is courting its three immediate neighbours with a proposal for construction

---

<sup>10</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, Nepal to get China rail link, *Asia Times Online*, 15 May, 2008, available at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JE15Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JE15Df01.html)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

of a trans- national network to bring together all of South Asia. Details of the plan are soon to be finalised by a multinational expert group” .<sup>13</sup>

### **Chinese Eyes on India’s Eastern Border**

Beijing is planning to extend the newly launched Golmund-Lhasa rail link up to Xigaze, south of Lhasa and from there to Yatung, a traditional trading centre situated at the mouth of the chumbi valley just a few kilometres away from strategic Nathu La pass . Anticipating the China’s strategic gain across the Sikkim, India approved a long pending proposal of rail link for this landlocked Himalayan State. The project, expected to be completed by 2015-16, will provide much-needed rail connectivity to Sikkim with the rest of the nation. The rail links at Gangtok and the respective Chinese link across the border will not only boost bilateral trade, but also counter each other on military movement.<sup>14</sup>

There is another Chinese proposal too to extend the Golmund -Lhasa line to Nyingchi, an important trading town north of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, at the tri - junction with Myanmar<sup>15</sup>. From Nyingchi this rail link is further scheduled to link up to Dali in Yunnan province, extension of this rail link up to Dali will complete the circuit of the Chinese national rail network. And connecting it up with the existing western railway network will grant strategic as well as economic benefits to China.

From Chinese Military point of view, this Lhasa - Nyingchi - Dali route is significant as it runs in an east - west direction almost parallel and quite close to the Arunachal border, means quick and easier deployment of military along the Sino -Indian border<sup>16</sup>. “It will enable the 14 Group of the Chinese Army located at Kunming, with its divisions at Dali, Kaiyuan and Kunming to rapidly move westwards from Yunnan to Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) by railway. Similarly, the 13 Group Army (Unit 56005) from its locations in the Sichuan province shall be able to utilise this linked railway network to move to TAR”<sup>17</sup>.

While China is reaching its railway almost near Arunachal Pradesh, Indian response is only limited to planning and feasibility studies. The Indian Railways’ network is yet to make a way into Arunachal Pradesh. In January 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took an initiative and announced the package to construct rail link between Harmuti<sup>18</sup> and Itanagar. The project, vital for national security, will also boost the local economy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Chance to Capitalise on India, China Rail Race, *The Kathmandu Post*, 29 July 2009, available at <http://www.asianewsnet.net/news.php?id=7080&sec=3>

<sup>14</sup> Shailender Arya, The Train to Lhasa, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Winter 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Harmuti , a small town of Assam, is located 33 Km south of the Itanagar.

India has lately woken up to China's aggressive infrastructure building along the eastern border. After years of hiccups, in 2006, India reversed its earlier policy to keep the weak roadways infrastructure in Arunachal, and planned out a building of seven new strategic roads in the region. The rationale behind earlier policy was that the feeble infrastructure in border area would deter the Chinese to obtaining an easy territorial access into the region. Later, aiming to improve the road connectivity in Arunachal Pradesh, a new plan called trans-Arunachal Highway project was announced by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008. The 1840 km long Trans Arunachal Highway is planned to interconnect its 11 district headquarters, while an additional 847 km 2-lane road would connect the remaining 5 districts. The project signifies the beginning of a new strategic vision of well-connected borders. Improved road and rail links would not only better connect the people of peripheral areas but also ensure greater security and economic progress.<sup>19</sup>

### **Road to progress**

New Delhi needs to formulate an enormous plan to build up its own connectivity along and across the long frontier with Tibet. Although in recent years it has made some progress on this front but still requires more roads and rail links to secure the border and revivify the economic and cultural linkages across the borders. The atrocious state of road and railways network along the border is also an outcome of a deliberate policy in New Delhi over the last many decades, not to develop connectivity in states bordering China. India feared that roads and railways in these Himalayan states would help the Chinese penetrate deep into India.

Along with good planning, India needs unrelenting efforts to improve the connectivity in border states. Almost all border road and rail projects are running behind the schedule. Besides the inhospitable terrains, other impediments like, lack of compulsory environmental clearances, bureaucratic hurdles and delays in allocation of funds are, however, proving to be major obstruction in completion of these ambitious projects.

Contrary to India, China has already demonstrated that it will not let any difficulties in the way of its attempt to transform its frontier regions and extend its economic influence across borders<sup>20</sup>. India should learn to adapt the Chinese initiatives instead of opposing it, and ability to convert strategic assets into economic opportunities. China's trans-border infrastructures build-up are no longer mere for military leverages but also an instruments for the expansion of Chinese economic influence into the Subcontinent<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Building Strategic Roadways in Arunachal Pradesh, 18 June 2006, available at <http://www.india-defence.com/reports/2107>

<sup>20</sup> C Raja Mohan, Delhi napping as Beijing pushes Tibet rail to Sikkim, Arunachal, *Indian Express*, 6 July, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

Well-developed infrastructures of roads and railways in frontier region would supplement India's vision of greater economic engagement with border states. Connectivity is much needed to enhance its economic sway in Tibet, Central Asia and South East Asia as well as accelerate the development of peripheral states. In and across the Trans Himalayan region, India needs to reinstate its connectivity to Kashgar. It is reasonable to connect Ladakh to Xinjiang region and further north with the development of access road to Karakoram pass to boost the economy of Ladakh and other parts of the Jammu & Kashmir. A well-developed transport infrastructure in India's North-East states can also provide vital transportation link to Southeast Asia on account of its geographic immediacy to the region.

***Dr. Amit Kumar is Associate Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi***