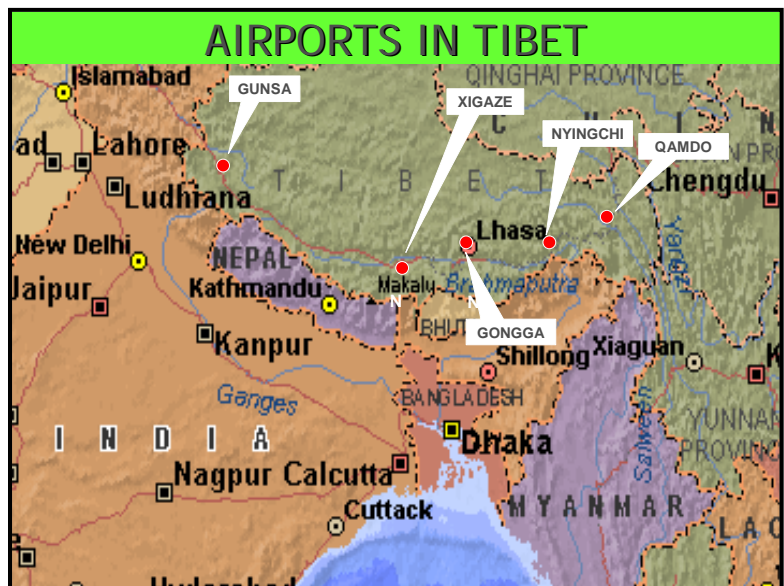


CONNECTING TIBET

- Commander Kamlesh Kumar Agnihotri*

China recently announced the completion of a civil airport at Gunsa in north-west Tibet. China has, of late, been developing infrastructure in Tibet at a very rapid pace, which includes the construction of roads and railways as also other projects like communication networks, electricity grid and oil pipelines. The most remarkable engineering feat achieved in Tibet was the construction and commissioning of the highest railway in the world in July 2006, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, running 1,956 kilometers from Gormo in Qinghai province to Lhasa. While the basic infrastructure projects have apparently been built in order to integrate the isolated 'Roof of the world' with the Chinese mainland and mainstream, the construction of a large number of airports in the sparsely populated and inhospitable Tibetan plateau lends an altogether different dimension.

The Gunsa Airport, construction of which commenced in May 2007, is expected to start operations on July 1, 2010 as the fourth civil airport in Tibet. The test flights were successfully conducted from October 13 to 18, this year. The airport has a 4,500 meter long runway and is located more than 4,000 meters above sea level in Ngari Prefecture. Ngari is located about 4,500 meters above sea level in the north-west Tibet, about 1,600 kilometers from the capital city of Lhasa.



In April this year, China also announced the commencement of construction of another new airport in Xigaze, at a cost of US Dollars 70 million. Work on the airport, at an altitude of 3,782 meters, would be finished in two years. The airport is being designed to handle 230,000 passengers and 1,150 tonnes of cargo annually by the year 2020. Xigaze, the second-biggest city in Tibet, has a population of 680,000 and has various ancient Buddhist monasteries.

These developments come on the heels of the commissioning of an airport at Nyingchi (Linzhi) in October 2007. The airport at a much lower altitude of 2950 meters above sea level, is equipped with night landing and all weather facilities. China has also undertaken the expansion of the Qamdo (Bangda) airfield, the highest airport in the world, located at 4300 meters above sea level. Lhasa, the capital, is serviced by an international airport at Gongga, about 50 kilometers to its south.

It is fairly obvious that the increased air connectivity in Tibet is being developed at a break-neck speed. The last three years have seen the completion of two airfields in Tibet- Nyingchi and Gunsa, and one in close proximity at Kangding in Sichuan province. This is the second highest airport in the world after Qamdo in Tibet, with a 4 kilometer runway. The Xigaze airport will also be completed in next two years.

There would thus, be five functional airports in Tibet by 2011. The spread of airports at nearly uniform intervals extending right from north-west to south-east, across Tibetan landscape has obvious security implications for India. Tibet has historically been considered as a safety buffer for India, with the mighty Himalayas providing an insurmountable natural barrier. However, the network of airfields in Tibet, all along the border, has the potential to render the formidable barrier ineffective. These airports are all capable of operating large civil aircrafts, ostensibly for handling increased tourist traffic in future. Needless to say, the infrastructure raised for civil usage can always be put to equally good military use. Though there are no reports of PLA Air Force units being permanently stationed in Tibet, the annual deployment of J-7 fighter aircrafts for training and area familiarization from Gongga airport during the fair weather from July to October is a regular feature.

Nyingchi airfield located just 40 kilometers from the contested Sino-Indian border in Arunachal Pradesh the Gunsa airfield only 90 kms from the disputed territory in northern sector can really be instrumental in rapid force buildup in these sensitive areas. The situation becomes more intricate when viewed holistically along with other infrastructure projects and facets in and around Tibet. For instance, all the above airports are in close vicinity of major military garrisons. Further, the capability of Chinese force projection and subsequent sustenance of operations through timely logistic replenishments would grow manifold when these airports are exploited in tandem with others like Kashi, Korla, Hotan, Yushu, Kangding and Chengdu, all located close to the Tibetan periphery. This integration would enable the Chinese forces to be deployed virtually

from anywhere in China, as also significantly extend the reach of the Chinese Air Force over the Indian subcontinent.

Though there are reports of the Indian Air Force reactivating some old airfields in northern and eastern sectors and the integrated border roads construction project is in progress, these measures are obviously inadequate, when compared to the scale of Chinese infrastructure developments across the border. It is therefore imperative that a detailed rethink about the security implications of the Chinese infrastructure in Tibet, especially in light of the progressively improving air connectivity, be carried out, so that suitable response strategies and options for future courses of action may emerge.

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