



POLICY BRIEF

Reassessing Sikkim's Strategic Role and India's Oversight in Geopolitical and Security Policy

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Introduction

Whenever India's strategic options are being discussed, Sikkim, a small northeastern state that shares borders with China, Bhutan, and Nepal, is all too often overlooked. Despite its biodiverse and culturally rich nature, its geopolitical significance has only briefly diverted public attention, usually during disasters like the 2017 Doklam Clash. However, Sikkim becomes as crucial as any other border state but underutilized component of national security strategy as India's security calculus continues to evolve in the wake of rising Sino-Indian tension and shifting Indo-Pacific geometrics. Sikkim's strategic importance stems not only from its precarious location next to the Siliguri Corridor and being surrounded by unstable international borders, but also from its capacity to serve as a hub for regional diplomacy, governance, and infrastructure. This policy brief aims to analyze India's present failure to include Sikkim into its larger geopolitical framework and suggests targeted measures to optimize its contribution to both national security and regional stability.

Strategic Importance: An Undervalued Region

Sikkim shares a 220 km-long border with the Tibet Autonomous Region of China and is located just above the Siliguri Corridor, a narrow stretch of land that connects mainland India to its northeastern states. This thin corridor, only 22 kilometers wide at its thinnest point, is India's Achilles' heel. Any suspected danger to its security could potentially cut off northeastern India from the rest of the country.

The Doklam Crisis of 2017, when India and China deployed soldiers stood face-to-face in a 73-day standoff, flashed Sikkim into the national limelight. While the episode highlighted the state's military significance, policy action has been uneven. The military presence via Sikkim is strong, comprising units like the newest regiment of Sikkim Scouts; however, the development of complementary civilian and strategic infrastructure remains inadequate. While neighboring Arunachal Pradesh has seen significant strategic investment under the India-China Border Roads (ICBR) program, Sikkim's allocation has been relatively limited, between 2017–22, the BRO completed 64 roads (3,097 km) in Arunachal Pradesh, compared to 18 roads (664 km) in Sikkim. Ongoing projects encompass ~1,725 km in Arunachal versus 47 km in Sikkim, indicating significantly higher strategic road-building allocation to Arunachal. This asymmetry contributes to Sikkim's continued vulnerability.

Moreover, coordination between military strategy and civilian policy in the region is weak. The Indian armed forces play a pivotal role in Sikkim's security architecture, yet their involvement often lacks corresponding policy and governance integration at the civilian level.

Infrastructure and Connectivity: Slow and Sporadic Progress

Despite Sikkim strategic significance, Sikkim suffers from ongoing infrastructural under-investment. The northern parts of the state, most importantly Lachen and Lachung in Mangan District, are still difficult to reach because of miserable roads and recurring landslides. The BRO (Border Roads Organization) has initiated various road widening programs, but their pace is slowed by harsh climate, environmental concerns, and bureaucratic delays.

The Sevoke-Rangpo rail project linking Sikkim with the national railway network had been delayed for years because of land acquisition and environmental clearance. Pakyong Airport,

Sikkim's sole and first airport, is operationally limited by a short runway, non-night landing facility, and almost frequent weather-related cancellations. These limitations curb civilian mobility as well as strategic readiness. On the other hand, China has constructed strong infrastructure on its side of the frontier, such as roads, airstrips, and railway lines enabling speedy mobilization of troops. The resulting asymmetry leaves India at a strategic disadvantage in the event of conflict or escalation. Therefore, strengthening dual-use infrastructure is not only a development imperative but also a national security necessity.

Governance Gaps and Federal Disconnect

Sikkim has a special constitutional position under Article 371(f), which protects native customs, laws and social-political systems after it merged with India in 1975. Though this has retained Sikkim's cultural identity and native governance freedom, it has also made it difficult for it to be integrated into federal policies and schemes.

Various key schemes, such as the Northeastern Council (NEC), the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), and the Northeast Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS), have restricted operation in Sikkim because of logistical and administrative hurdles. Central-state coordination is also hindered by the lack of a strong institutional mechanism to link local stakeholders with national policy frameworks. This weakens the monitoring and implementation of projects critical to both development and security. In addition, there is a lack of human capacity in human resources and technical training among local administrative staff to implement sophisticated national policies, particularly those concerning infrastructure, defense frameworks and regional diplomacies.

The Lachung-Lachen Challenge

The special socio-political conditions in northern Sikkim add to the challenge of governance. Societies in Lachung and Lachen have traditionally enjoyed considered autonomy. Local bodies such as the Dzumsa system regulate social and legal matters independently of state institutions. While this has allowed for culturally sensitive self-governance, it has also created grey zones where state and central policies have limited reach.

In recent years, there have been reports that local resistance has hindered development and governance efforts in such regions. From the construction of roads to land acquisition, projects essential for national security and development are held back or derailed by local opposition,

notably, the Sela Tunnel project in Arunachal Pradesh, inaugurated in 2024, ensures all-weather connectivity to Tawang, reducing travel time by 90 minutes and enhancing rapid troop mobilisation. Respect for local culture is of course necessary, but a failure to have an effective state presence within a sensitive border region can breed security risks.

A sophisticated, hybrid approach to governance that harmonizes federal direction with grassroots involvement is necessary to ensure that development and strategic issues are addressed without undermining cultural autonomy.

Policy Recommendations

Considering the multi-faceted nature of the issues confronting Sikkim, policy interventions need to be multi-dimensional, collaborative, and context specific. The recommendations below seek to bridge these gaps.

1. Set up the Strategic Infrastructure Mission for Sikkim (SIMS)

Initiate a special mission like the Bharatmala Project, with a twin mandate from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Home Affairs. The mission must focus on all-weather roads, tunnels, and bridges with focus on dual-use design. Local employment and companies' must be used wherever possible to maximize buy-in and speed-up work, Sikkim's rugged terrain, seismic vulnerability, and scarcity of flat, buildable land create structural impediments to large-scale investment, increasing logistical costs and limiting infrastructure scalability.

2. Enhance Pakyong Airport's Operational Capacity and Rail Connectivity

Develop Pakyong Airport with night-landing facilities, lengthen the runway, and provide advanced navigations systems. Accelerate the Sevoke-Rangpo-Gangtok railway project as a green infrastructure project. Make this a National Strategic Project to be announced with time-bound targets and a joint central-state monitoring committee.

3. Institutionalize a Sikkim Integration Task Force (SITF)

Establish a task force with members drawn from the Home Ministry, Defense Ministry, Railways, Civil Aviation and Government of Sikkim. The SITF must facilitate integration of development, security and environment policies with convergence of central schemes. It must prepare quarterly Sikkim Strategic Review Report, Given

Sikkim's constrained fiscal capacity, a Sikkim Investment and Trade Facilitation (SITF) framework would function optimally as a policy coordination platform leveraging central government schemes (e.g., North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme) and multilateral development assistance, rather than relying solely on state funding.

4. Reorient Local Governance Models in Northern Districts

Implement semi-autonomous local governance in Lachung and Lachen, based on the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. The councils can absorb traditional institutions such as Dzumsa into an overall governance framework with state presence while maintaining community autonomy. Integration of the Dzumsa into formal governance could draw on models such as the Autonomous District Councils of Meghalaya, which allow customary law to operate alongside statutory law, ensuring both cultural preservation and legal compliance.

5. Integrate Sikkim into Act East and Indo-Pacific Strategy

Sikkim is strategically placed to be a great node for Himalayan regional diplomacy, this designation could be operationalized by tracking indicators such as the number of international delegations hosted, the percentage growth in cross-border trade via Nathu La, and the volume of bilateral agreements facilitated through Sikkim-based platforms. Build cross-border trade hubs with Bhutan and Nepal in the BIMSTEC and BBIN frameworks, given the limited operational progress of BIMSTEC and BBIN in recent years, Sikkim's regional strategy should be supplemented by robust bilateral initiatives with Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh to mitigate the risks of multilateral stagnation. Build trade facilitation hubs and enhance transitional highway connectivity.

6. Establish a National Centre for Himalayan Strategy Studies in Gangtok

Commence and fund a research center specializing in the study of the Himalayan Region, with areas of concentration being security, climate change, border control, and Sino-India relations. The center can act as a think tank for policy input on a real-time basis and strategic future forecasting.

7. Increase Digital and Telecom Infrastructure

Establish a Digital Sikkim Mission to provide internet connectivity in all border villages. This will facilitate e-governance, education, and enable real-time communication during any crisis. Affordable telecom access is also necessary for integrated defense operations.

Conclusion

India's strategic vision will have to change to see Sikkim not only as a territorial border but as a future hub of connectivity, diplomacy, and green development. The state is no longer on the periphery, it is central. Here, 'central' denotes Sikkim's strategic importance as a geographic gateway to the northeastern states, coupled with its symbolic role in advancing India's Act East policy through the Nathu-La trade corridor. But unless conscious policy intervention is made to meet the current gaps in infrastructure, governance, and federal coordination, the potential of such a state will be under-valued, and its vulnerabilities unresolved. A comprehensive approach that honors its cultural distinctiveness but integrates it strongly into national planning is necessary.

By structural reforms, targeted investments, and innovative governance, Sikkim has the potential to evolve from a forgotten outpost to a key pillar of India national security and regional diplomacy. According to the 2011 Census of India, Sikkim's population of approximately 610,577 comprises Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali communities, maintaining relative interethnic stability compared to insurgency-affected northeastern states. This social cohesion provides a comparative model for peace-building and inter-community governance in the region, while also informing how Sikkim's demographic stability contrasts with the unrest in Manipur and Nagaland. Such stability limits China's ability to exploit internal unrest as a pretext for territorial encroachment.

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