



Linking India's Northeast and Southeast Asia Security Implications

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It would be a tremendous boost to the impoverished economies of India's northeastern states if the border it shares with Southeast Asia were to be opened up, linking both regions through a free trade agreement. Experts argue that the Northeast must be allowed to play the arrow-head role in the further evolution of India's look east policy. Given the state of insurgency most of the states of the region continue to be affected by, the projected economic gains from such a marriage of two contiguous economies will be overshadowed by the advantages that would accrue to the armed non-state groups. Moreover, the insurgents have the ability to derail the entire process. A position where the state is able to nullify such abilities of the insurgents must be reached before the international borders of the region are thrown open to the forces of globalization.

REALITY OF CHAOS & UNQUIET BORDER

"Law and order, especially internal security" is the first among the "three critical non-economic requirements" that the Northeast Vision 2020 document says "will condition economic performance on the ground." For the last six decades, several insurgency movements have risen in each of the states of the Northeast, posing a serious threat to the state-building process in the region. Many of these armed movements which have transformed into trans-border criminal ventures in quick time, have not only been an impediment to the success of the development ventures of the government in the region, but have also created an atmosphere of fear and trepidation, discouraging economic investment by private players. At least four of the eight northeastern states continue to be afflicted by

intense violence which claimed 1091 lives in 2007 and 1054 lives in 2008. Insurgents have used the territory of these states to travel between the Northeast and neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar.

For several years, Myanmar's Sagaing division has been home to a number of insurgent formations from the Northeast. The absence of the writ of the Myanmarese authorities in these ungoverned frontiers has allowed insurgent groups to maintain near permanent facilities in these areas, establish linkages with other local insurgent outfits and illegal arms and drug cartels.

In fact, Myanmar has remained a major source of arms for insurgent groups in the northeast. Easy availability of sophisticated small arms and explosives has been a crucial factor responsible for the swift transformation of the ragtag outfits to entities that can engage security forces in protracted armed struggles. The fact that there is a free movement regime between India and Myanmar has made cross-border smuggling of small arms that much easier. Arms from the Southeast Asian nations have either been routed through Bangladesh (through the Garo Hills route in Meghalaya) or have come through the porous Indo-Myanmar border at Moreh. In fact, Mandalay in central Myanmar and the border town of Tamu across Moreh in Manipur have been identified as the hub of illegal arms smuggling.

Even in the quiet and peaceful state of Mizoram, which shares a 404 kilometre border with Myanmar, the rise in the instances of arms seizures indicates an increase in the level of arms smuggling from that country. According to an estimate, such seizures in Mizoram rose by 21.43 per cent in 2007 compared to the previous year and included an AK-56 assault

rifle, three .9 mm pistols, large number of revolvers, hand grenades, explosive shells, locally-made guns and a large quantity of ammunition. According to an April 2009 estimate of the Dimapur police, 90 per cent of the arms seized from smugglers in Nagaland are country-made weapons originating from Moreh.

The Northeast's proximity to the heroin-producing 'Golden Triangle' (Laos, Myanmar and Thailand) has been exploited by the insurgents. Many of the outfits of the region are known to have benefited financially from the drugs trade, in association with the flourishing drug cartels of the Southeast Asian region. Police sources indicate Moreh (Manipur) and Champhai (Mizoram) along the India-Myanmar border and Dimapur (Nagaland) have emerged as three major centres for the transportation of drugs. Although many outfits in Manipur and Nagaland have a professed policy of not indulging in drugs trade, data relating to arrests and seizures indicate to the contrary. As a result, the Northeast has witnessed high rates of intravenous drug use over the years. As per a 2001 assessment, the region is believed to be "home to more than 30 per cent of the country's total intravenous drug users".

Over the years, while India has concentrated its efforts on managing its borders with Bangladesh; the Indo-Myanmar border has largely remained unfenced, thereby, catering to the needs of insurgent outfits. India has sought to fence at least parts of the border to deter the movement of the insurgents. The Planning Commission has also emphasised the need for the construction of a parallel road along the entire length of the Indo-Myanmar border. Only 52 out of the total 1,643 kilometre stretch of the international border with Myanmar is manned by Indian security forces. However, Myanmar's lack of enthusiastic response continues to be problematic. As per reports in November 2007, the Myanmar government insisted that the "issue needs higher level policy decision".

An agreement for the maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the border areas was signed

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between India and Myanmar on 29 January 1994 for enhancing cooperation on various issues of mutual concern, including those relating to security, drug trafficking, border management and border trade. India has sought the cooperation of the Myanmarese junta in controlling the activities of insurgent outfits. Of late, such cooperation has even been sought to be elicited through a generous supply of military hardware. However, the Myanmarese military's response has been rather lukewarm. Since the mid-1980s, it has been conducting intermittent operations against the insurgent outfits, allowing them to reoccupy their camps after soldiers have withdrawn from the hostile terrain. Reports in 2006 even indicated a warming of relations between the UNLF militants and the lower-rank Myanmarese military personnel who passed on information of impending operations in return for gifts.

II IMPACT OF INSTABILITY

The near un-winnable war against insurgents in Manipur is largely attributable to their ability to seek refuge within Myanmar. As a result, their ability to impact the general security scenario in the state and economic activities largely remains undisturbed. It is difficult to imagine that future trade between the region and Southeast Asia will remain immune from their influence.

Extortion by the insurgents in Manipur affects almost every earning citizen in the state. In September 2007, drug stores in Imphal shut shop after militant groups sent them hefty extortion notes. The state government's assurance notwithstanding, the shops remained closed for almost a month, and were eventually forced open by the state police. In May 2009, pharmacists closed their shops in Imphal following a demand for Rupees one million from an insurgent faction. In the same month, pharmacists in Nagaland ran out of stocks of life saving drugs after transporters refused to ply their trucks following extortion demands by insurgent factions.

Five insurance companies in Manipur shut down business for about a fortnight in May-June 2007 following extortion demands by unidentified outfits. In January 2008, all 15 branches and two link offices of the United Bank of India in Manipur shut down operations for four days, between January 8 and 11, after a militant outfit served an extortion note of INR One million and threatened the employees. The branches reopened only after the outfit withdrew its demand. The four-day shutdown "not only affected the Indo-Myanmar

border trade 'severely', but over 35,000 customers of the UBI, the first nationalized bank to enter the State, couldn't carry out their daily transactions that cross over INR 10 to 15 crores."

Traders and transporters engaged in the border town of Moreh along the Indo-Myanmar border, which is being developed as one of the four Land Custom Stations, apart from Dawki, Sutrakandi & Agartala, are forced to pay regularly to different outfits with non-payment resulting in attacks on trucks and other vehicles. In May 2009, however, one of the prominent outfits in the state, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced a suspension of the 'tax' collection "considering the economic plight of the people." This is indicative of the state of affairs in the region, where respite from insurgency can only be granted by the insurgents themselves.

Manipur's woes have been further aggravated by the activities of insurgents operating in neighbouring Nagaland as well as in the hill districts of the state. The impact of their activities has been most visible in the dominance that they maintain on the two National Highways, NH-39 and NH-53, cutting off Manipur's links with Assam and mainland India on a whim. NH-39 connects Dimapur in Nagaland with Imphal and NH-53 links Silchar in Assam with Manipur's capital. A report in April 2009 indicated that the trucks plying along the route were being forced to pay to the tune of Rupees 20,000 to 50,000 by insurgent outfits as well as criminal formations, in the name of goods tax, godown tax, vehicle tax etc. On many occasions, trucks have been looted or burnt for non-compliance. With no cooperation from either the state of Nagaland or the government in New Delhi, the impact of such sustained extortion has always been severely felt on the prices of essential commodities in Manipur.

Such rampant extortion has added to the exorbitant transportation costs in the region. A planning commission report noted that "A moving truck load of goods from Moreh to Dimapur, a distance of 316 km, costs Rs 50,000. Part of these charges may be due to the fact that the truck was carrying illegally traded goods. Yet the number of "tax collectors" is likely to collect something from trucks carrying legally traded goods too. These "taxes" must act as a significant disincentive to any one thinking of setting up an industry in the North-East to meet North-East demand."

And indeed, it is not just the government apathy and the concerns raised by security analysts that

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have put a spanner over the look east policy. The NSCN-IM, in November 2007 decreed that no construction would be allowed to be carried out in Naga areas without first securing permission from it. Passing its diktat on the INR727 crore Jiribam-Toupul Railway Project, which is Manipur's rail link to the rest of the country, the NSCN-IM's "Ministry of Finance" threatened to destroy construction material and arrest labourers in case of non-compliance. The outfit's Minister for Information & Publicity, Tongmet Konyak said "The people of the region have to be consulted first as to whether they want the railway line. Without the assent of the people, and the GPRN, nothing can be done. The same applies to all contract works in the Naga areas of Manipur. No contract works can henceforth be issued without the GPRN's approval."

III FORCE PREPAREDNESS

Faced with such odds, the linking up of the economies of the northeast and southeast Asia necessitates adequate preparedness at the level of the state police forces, not just to ensure that the highways of development remain free from the influence of the insurgents, but also to ensure that common folk, and not the militants gain from the economic linkages. To this end, both the quality and numeric strength of the police forces assume critical importance.

The Annual Report of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), 2001, noted that "The condition of police forces in the North Eastern States is quite poor. Many of the militant groups have far more modern arms and equipment than the State Police." There is little evidence of any dramatic transformation in the circumstances since this observation was made, and, in the absence of the army and central para-military forces - forces modelled on a brawnier archetype with a better range of weapons - the police in the various states of the region retain very limited capacities to engage with the terrorists.

Police-population ratio in each state of the northeast, although higher than the national

average, remains far below than the internationally prescribed standard for conflict-ridden regions. The difficult terrain of the region makes the task of the existing personnel even more difficult. Thus, states in the region remain perennially dependent on central forces.

The presence of the central forces however, has created a different sort of problem for the region, with civil rights organisations decrying the policy to "heavily securitise or militarise" this region of the country. It needs to be noted that even this 'heavy' deployment of central security forces was found to be inadequate and had to be supplemented by additional reinforcement of para-military forces during the April-May 2009 elections to the Indian Parliament. This was done, in spite of the fact that none of the major insurgent formations had called for a boycott of the polls.

The programme for police modernization in many of these states has languished due to bureaucratic apathy and lack of political will. A 2009 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) criticised the Assam police for having failed to buy bullets for the AK series rifles it bought for its personnel. Similarly, in Nagaland, the state police department chooses to concentrate its personnel in the urban areas whereas bulk of the insurgent violence and activities have been reported from the country side. In Manipur, the lack of support from the state police has made counter-insurgency operations predominantly army-led and their achievements, temporary. Moreover, poor fiscal condition in most of the states has prevented them from recruiting more personnel to fill up the vacancies. Both Assam and Manipur for years had imposed a moratorium on recruitment. As per available media reports, Assam has 7,776 vacancies including 6695 constables, 17 additional superintendents of police (ASP), 135 deputy superintendents (DSPs), besides inspectors, head constables, and vacancies in other ranks. .

IV CONCLUSIONS

The votaries of the look east policy downplay the security scenario by arguing that four of the eight northeastern states – Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Sikkim - are free from security-related problems, while vast areas of the remaining four states - Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland - are free from militancy. They argue that economic development of the region has the potential to act as an anti-dote to the

insurgencies. For example, in October 2007, the DONER Minister Mani Shankar Aiyer said that there could be no better security guarantee for India than if the northeastern region were to prosper and shine much more than its immediate neighbourhood across the border. He said, "Emergence of the north east as an economically prosperous zone could be the best guarantee to the security concerns".

While such arguments do make valid points, given the present circumstances, the open border economy will have to be guaranteed and protected by adequate security on the Indian side and also by agreed security arrangements between India and Myanmar. Neither of these, at present, looks promising.

The assumption that the forces of development can overshadow the insurgencies is based on the premise that insurgencies are inherently linked to the underdevelopment of the region. Most insurgency movements in the region have deteriorated to being criminal enterprises, with little connect with the original objectives and ideologies that shaped them. Thus, the belief that the largesse flowing from cross-border economic enterprises will contribute to their weakening, is erroneous. Leakage of government funds has enforced the insurgents throughout the region. Trade with Southeast Asia through the Northeast might contribute in a similar manner to their war chest.

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