



THE PROTECTION OF NORTH EAST BORDER AREAS AND CROSS BORDER INSURGENCY

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Abstract

The armed insurrections in north-east India have tested the Indian military might for over four decades. The region is characterised by widespread conflicts which are related to the geography of the region, the multi ethnicity of its population and the political and economic feeding grounds of discontent. The conflict dynamics range from insurgency for secession to insurgency for autonomy, from sponsored terrorism to ethnic clashes, to conflicts generated as a result of a continuous inflow of migrants from across the borders, as well as from the other states of the country. Terrorism in the region can best be understood as a rational strategy to achieve political and personal ends, both through the use of extreme violence and intimidation through the instrumentalities of the state and at times with the complicity of the state's agencies

Border areas have their own problems and peculiarities. Such areas are in general less accessible, making provision of basic facilities more difficult and costly. Such areas are often more vulnerable to illegal infiltration of population, which adds pressure on their economic and environmental resources. Moreover, porous nature of the border enables easy cross border passage for insurgents and criminals including drug traffickers. Thus, governments of the states with international border are required to bear heavier burden for not only providing basic facilities to the people living in such areas but also for the broader national goal of securing the border. The Northeast region with 99 per cent of its boundary being international border, the problems and peculiarities are even more accentuated. The region consists of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is located between latitudes 290 and 220 North and longitudes about 89.46 and 97.5/ East. The region is covering an area of 262185 sq. km, which is nearly 8 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The region has a population of 389.84 Lakh that is 3.79 per cent of the total population of India. The region has a vast coverage of forest nearly 55 per cent of the total geographical area. The States of the region are surrounded by China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan. In fact, the region has a long international border of (5182 km), which is more than 99 percent of its total geographical boundary. These States have international border with China (1395 km), Bhutan (455 km), Myanmar (1640 km), Bangladesh (1596 km) and Nepal (97 km).

Keywords: - Border Areas, Cross Border insurgency, Illegal Infiltration, North East India etc...



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Introduction

A cursory look at the demographic mosaic of north-eastern India would show that this region is home to a curious amalgam of cross-cutting societies. What compounds the problem of this plurality is the fact that the tendency for ethno-political assertion is high among almost all the groups. This is primarily because the political boundaries in most cases do not coincide with the existing social boundaries. The north-eastern units of the Indian federation, in spite of several political permutations and combinations have not been able to cater to the demands of all the ethnic categories clamouring for recognition of their distinctive identity.

Many ethnic groups in the region especially in the areas bordering the international boundaries have more in common with the population living across the boundary than with their own nationals. The affinity of groups with their kin groups across the border and the sense of support (both material and non material) they derive from them, have had serious implications. The social continuities that stretch across the territorial frontiers have led to demands by the politically fragmented groups to redraw international boundaries and also to reorganise states within the Indian Union.¹ In many cases due to external manipulations and support, these fragmented ethno-political groupings have taken to arms and have adopted a line of confrontation with the state and central administration. The scope for resolution of conflicts at the internal level has been affected by such external involvement. This has had tremendous impact on the overall security situation in India. This paper seeks to throw light on the external coordinates of the conflicts in the northeast.

Countries surrounding India have been active in exploiting the volatile situation presented by the turmoil in the northeast. Not only countries such as China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, but also smaller powers such as Bhutan and Nepal have been involved in the region. Through political backing, economic assistance, logistic support, military training or arms supplies these countries have varyingly contributed to the ongoing violence in this region.

The external powers and their activities have impacted upon the security of India's northeast. Historical and geographical factors have compounded the security concerns of the government. A number of factors are responsible for the creation of unrest and turmoil in the northeast. It is only in recent years that the destabilising role of the external powers and the security threat that they represent is being probed. There does hardly much understand how small but hostile neighbours have taken advantage of a country's vulnerability in its strategic soft underbelly. The security threat posed by hostile external forces does not engage the country in the traditional military sense. At the same time support and encouragement of the militant activities

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through moral and material help has created disaffection amongst the local populace and necessitated the deployment of security forces in counter-insurgency operations. Important in the context of the northeast is the threat posed by massive in-migration in the region, drug trafficking, the grant of base and training facilities to the insurgents by our neighbours and the attempt to create a chasm between communities. The Chinese have scaled down their involvement with the north-eastern insurgent groups for about two decades now. The Pakistani role in encouraging insurgency in the region had come to an end with the emergence of Bangladesh. This was, however, only temporary. Hostile elements in Bangladesh revived the linkages between unrest in the northeast and the use of East Pakistani territory by the insurgents. In recent years, Pakistan and the role of ISI has become central to India's security concerns.

Need of the study

In this age of globalization and increased international cooperation, however, border areas also signify some new opportunities. Such opportunities are believed to be immense for Northeast India due to its geographical proximity to the prosperous East and Southeast Asian economies. However preparing the region to exploit such opportunities also first requires investment in the necessary infrastructure.

The problems and challenges of development along the border regions have a unique place and significance in the process of national planning due to the specific needs of the people living in the stressful environmental conditions. However, the magnitude of the problem differs from region to region depending upon the physiographical condition, socio-cultural set-up etc.

Countries that are unfriendly towards India find an opportunity in the ongoing turmoil in the northeast and their involvement has made the problems that much more difficult to resolve. Because of geographical proximity, even smaller countries such as Nepal and Bhutan are unable to remain immune to the developments in this region. The transborder nature of the ethnic and religious affinities provides a fertile ground for external involvement. As a result, various militant groups operating in northeast received political as well as financial support from across the border. The porous nature of the borders makes it easier for militants to operate and maintain military and logistical bases in the neighbouring countries. Among the various external forces active in the region, Pakistan has been the prominent player. Even though it has been meddling with the regional politics since the late 1950s, in recent years the involvement has increased. Its support, channelled through the ISI comes in the form of financial assistance, ideological indoctrination and logistical support in the form of false passports and documents.

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Because of geographical considerations, Bangladesh and Nepal have emerged as the prime conduits for Pakistani activities in the northeast. So protection of the north east border is very important in the present times.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study are:-

1. To know the real issues of north-eastern border and its protection.
2. Effective method to stop cross border insurgency.

Methodology

This is a descriptive study based on secondary data procured from reputed sources like articles of Indian and International refereed research journals, books, websites, magazines, and other relevant documents etc.

The Protection of North East Border Areas:-

Northeast India (officially North Eastern Region, NER) is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country. It comprises seven states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal, with a width of 21 to 40 kilometres (13 to 25 mi), connects the North Eastern Region with East India. The region shares an international border of 5,182 kilometres (3,220 mi) (about 99 percent of its total geographical boundary) with several neighbouring countries – 1,395 kilometres (867 mi) with Tibet Autonomous Region, China in the north, 1,640 kilometres (1,020 mi) with Myanmar in the east, 1,596 kilometres (992 mi) with Bangladesh in the south-west, 97 kilometres (60 mi) with Nepal in the west, and 455 kilometres (283mi) with Bhutan in the north-west. It comprises an area of 262,230 square kilometres (101,250 sq mi), almost 8 percent of that of India,

Currently, most of the states in the region are affected by some form of conflict, except for Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim in which the situation is at the moment relatively stable. The reasons for the respective conflicts are wide ranging from separatist movements, to inter-community, communal and inter-ethnic conflicts.

Unfortunately, the data and information on the region is not sufficiently analyzed and communicated between the region and the Centre, contributing to further misinformation, mismanagement and alienation. At another level, conflict in the region has been an all pervasive phenomena, and in its violent form, it has not only affected the territorial and political sovereignty of the Indian state, but also the life of the various people living in the region in incomprehensible and inexplicable terms. In a drastic and dreaded sense, there is a “culture” of

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conflict and unfortunately, people have submitted to such an existence. However, amidst the widespread sense of helplessness, there is also an overwhelming desire and force to be free from such a situation of conflict which cripples the people from all sides. To gain a holistic understanding of the problem that has historical and contemporary dimensions, it is important to assess and understand the various facets of the problem that interact with each other.

Historical reasons for the conflict

The historical connections among the traditional tribes in the Northeast are largely of Tibeto-Burman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. It is ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from the other states of India. Though cultural and ethnic diversity are not causes for conflict, but one of the major problem areas is that the Northeast is territorially organized in such a manner that ethnic and cultural specificities were ignored during the process of delineation of state boundaries in the 1950s, giving rise to discontentment and assertion of one's identity. Whereas, the colonial rulers took nearly a century to annex the entire region, and administered the hills as a loose 'frontier area', with the result, that large parts of the north eastern hill areas never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before.

Hence, their allegiance to the newly formed Indian nation-state was lacking from the beginning – accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) – which meant the loss of a major chunk of the physical connection between mainland India and Northeast India. Interestingly, 99 percent of the Northeast's boundaries is international and only one percent is domestic boundary.

Issues of governance

The Indian government's past and ongoing processes of national integration, state-building and democratic consolidation have further aggravated the conflict scenario in the region. For instance, the eight states comprising the Northeast is populated by nearly 40 million inhabitants who vary in language, race, tribe, caste, religion, and regional heritage. Therefore, most often, the clubbing of all these states under the tag of 'northeast' has tended to have a homogenizing effect with its own set of implications for policy formulation and implementation; not to mention local aversion to such a construct.

The politico-administrative arrangements made by the Centre have also been lacking. For instance, the introduction of the Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils (currently there are ten such Councils in the region and many more demanding such status) ended up creating multiple

power centres instead of bringing in a genuine process of democratization or autonomy in the region. Moreover, Para 12 (A) of the Sixth Schedule clearly states that, whenever there is a conflict of interest between the District Councils and the state legislature, the latter would prevail. It is even alleged that it is “a mere platform for aspiring politicians who nurture ambitions to contest assembly polls in the future” (Teresa Rehman, *Tehelka*, 30 January 2009). The AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act) for instance, shows the inability and reluctance of the government to solve the conflict with adequate political measures. The AFSPA was passed on 18 August, 1958, as a short-term measure to allow deployment of the army to counter an armed separatist movement in the Naga Hills, has been in place for the last five decades and was extended to all the seven states of the Northeast region in 1972 (with the exception of Mizoram). It was part of a bundle of provisions, passed by the central government, to retain control over the Naga areas, in which the Naga National Council (NNC) demanded further autonomous rights. The AFSPA became a powerful measure for the central and the state government to act against actors challenging the political and territorial integrity of India. As a result, the Indian army for the first time since its independence was deployed to manage an internal conflict. But, instead of resolving the problem, it led to an ongoing escalation of the conflict by bringing it on a military level. The regular violations of human rights has led to a radicalization and militarization of the region and weakened also the supporters of a political solution. According to the Human Rights Watch Report (August 2008), “The Act violates provisions of international human rights law, including the right to life, the right to be protected from arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. It also denies the victims of the abuses the right to a remedy.” A fact-finding commission, appointed by the government in 2004, complained that the “AFSPA has become a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness”.

India’s ‘look east policy’ which was formulated in 1991 on the heels of India’s economic liberalization, was a foreign economic policy initiative towards South East Asia. The Northeast which is geographically situated between mainland India and Southeast Asia is supposed to have had immense developmental benefits as a result of this initiative and hence, have synergy effects on reducing poverty in the region; as well as on insurgency and armed conflict. The region’s diverse natural resources, rich bio-diversity and enormous hydro-electricity potential, among others, could also help to overcome the widespread feeling of backwardness among the inhabitants of the Northeast. But there is also increasing argument made that the impact of

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increased introduction of market imperatives in the traditional society of the region would have irreversible impact on the people's culture and life and it would also lead to increased settlement of mainland people to the northeast. Thereby it is of high importance, that the announced opening will take place in a regulated frame and through cooperation with the local people, otherwise it could aggravate the tensions between the centre and the region. The government has also faced criticism in the way in which it has been looking at the Northeast as an issue of territorial security rather than development . The fear of a growing Chinese influence, as well as, increasing cross-border terrorism (Myanmar, Bangladesh) in the region are some of the factors cited as reasons for limiting India in its attempt to open the region.

To conclude, in the words of Clemens Spiess, the various problems and conflict constellations in the Northeast “represent(s) durable challenges to the integrative and accommodative capacity of Indian democracy”. The HBS India programme on ‘Democracy and Conflict’, of which the Northeast is an important component, focuses mainly on the Northeast region of India and aims to support, facilitate and contribute to civil society engagement, participation, and intervention in the region with regard to conflict prevention. Thereby, facilitating intermediation between the various stakeholders involved in the diverse conflict constellations in the region, be it the public, civil society activists, state representatives, journalists, academicians and researchers; and contributing to the promotion of integration and socialisation into a democratic political culture through dialogue and civic education. The overall objective of the HBS programme is to promote the peaceful coexistence of conflict affected ethnic groups through strengthened democratic processes with gender being across-cutting issue.

Cross border insurgency

India's Northeast is one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots, not simply because the region has as many as 30 armed insurgent organizations operating and fighting the Indian state, but because trans-border linkages that these groups have, and strategic alliances among them, have acted as force multipliers and have made the conflict dynamics all the more intricate. With demands of these insurgent groups ranging from secession to autonomy and the right to self-determination, and a plethora of ethnic groups clamouring for special rights and the protection of their distinct identity, the region is bound to be a turbulent one.

Moreover, the location of the eight north eastern Indian States itself is part of the reason why it has always been a hotbed of militancy with trans-border ramifications. This region of 263,000
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square kilometres³ shares highly porous and sensitive frontiers with China in the North, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the South West and Bhutan to the North West. The region's strategic location is underlined by the fact that it shares a 4,500km-long international border with its four South Asian neighbours.

Strategic Importance:

Strategic Importance of North East: Northeast India has an extraordinarily important international strategic dimension and is a vital part of the nation's defence architecture. Its importance is enumerated below:

International Border:

These states share their borders with other countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. It makes up close to 40% of India's land borders with its neighbours.

1. Bridge to South East Asia:

The region is at the crossroads of India and Southeast Asia. It is a bridgehead between India and the vibrant economies of Southeast Asia, including southern China.

- 3. Economic Significance:** North East is endowed with huge natural resource (oil, gas, coal, hydro, fertile land, etc) which can be harnessed for nation development.

Overview of conflict in North East

India's North east region has been land of thousand mutinies. These mutinies have been taking place since pre-independence times. The insurgencies in north east are a reflection of its social, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, terrain, socio-economic development, politico-economic conditions, historical evolution and changes in the environment of the area.

A cursory look at the demographic mosaic of north-eastern India would show that this region is home to a curious amalgam of cross-cutting societies. What compounds the problem of this plurality is the fact that the tendency for ethno-political assertion is high among almost all the groups. This is primarily because the political boundaries in most cases do not coincide with the existing social boundaries. The north-eastern units of the Indian federation, in spite of several political permutations and combinations have not been able to cater to the demands of all the ethnic categories clamouring for recognition of their distinctive identity.

This is reflected in the pattern of conflicts, which are varied in their nature and causes and the stance of insurgent groups which remain divergent and ever changing. These range from secession to autonomy, movements against foreigners and immigrants, ethnic integration and reaction to perceived imposition of Indianness. The common factor is resorting to violence in articulation and mobilization of the demands.

Conflicts in the region can be broadly grouped under the following categories:-

National conflicts: Involving concept of a distinct 'homeland' as a separate nation and pursuit of the realization of that goal by use of various methods both violent as well as non violent. Ex: ULFA demand for sovereign Assam, NSCN for Greater Nagaland.

Ethnic conflicts: Involving assertion of numerically smaller and less dominant tribal groups against the political and cultural hold of the dominant tribal group. In Assam this also takes the form of tension between local and migrant communities.

Sub-regional conflicts: Involving movements which ask for recognition of sub-regional aspirations and often come in direct conflict with the State Governments or even the autonomous Councils. Ex: UPDS in Assam.

General conditions favouring Insurgency

Large scale migration has created a fear in the minds of people that they will be reduced to minority in their own states or regions. Migrants threaten their culture and traditions and also occupy already limited employment opportunities. Migration of Muslims has also imparted it a communal colour.

Lack of economic opportunities and governance deficit making it easier for people to feel alienated and left out and thus providing support for insurgency.

Porous international borders and easy availability of arms. Difficult terrain and weak infrastructure facilitating insurgents involved in conflict. Deep sense of alienation due to human right violation and excesses by security forces.

Suggestions/ Conclusion

Insurgency

1. Thorough background check of all insurgents groups should be carried out before the central government enters into any Ceasefire or Suspension of Operations Agreements with the insurgents.

Political

1. Political solutions to the Assam problem should be discussed openly as widely as possible to avoid backlash from the tribal and the minority population of the state.
2. A system of work permit should be issued so that the illegal Bangladeshi migrants do not end up as Indian citizens.
3. The Autonomous District Councils should be empowered.

4. Governance should be improved in a step by step manner. Strict supervision by senior officials should be initiated to improve the delivery system of the government.

Development

1. The Ministry of the Development of the North East region (DoNER) be merged with the North East Council (NEC) for better strategic planning and coordination of various developmental projects in the region.
2. Focus of the Ministry of DoNER and NEC should be on investment in mega-projects which will make big difference to the development of the region.
3. Institutional capacities in the North east should be developed urgently.
4. Pragmatic land use policy should be formulated for attracting industries in the region. Micro, small and medium enterprises should be encouraged.
5. Local tourism should be promoted. Tourists residing in the eight North Eastern states should be encouraged to travel within the region.
6. Niche tourism or high end tourism should be encouraged. Medical and higher education tourism should be encouraged.
7. The North east should become a single economic unit without disturbing the political boundaries of the states. No internal traffic barriers in the region. Exclusive five year plan for the North east focusing on development of infrastructure.

Look East Policy

1. Greater awareness about the Look East Policy and its benefits to the North East should be generated among the policymakers and the intelligentsia of the region.
2. Ties with Myanmar should be deepened by exploiting Myanmar's anxieties about China as well as existing deep civilization and spiritual ties.
3. The North East region must be included in the India-ASEAN Vision for trade and cooperation. Development Plan for the North East should factor India-ASEAN strategic cooperation.
4. Integrated and bottoms up approaches are required for integration of the North east in the Look East Policy. The North East should formulate plans as to how it can engage with the ASEAN. Better coordination of efforts by all the Northeastern states should be ensured.
5. Visa offices of Bangladesh and Myanmar should be located in the North East.

6. Centre's/Departments for the studies of neighboring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal in Universities should be set up in universities to understand India's neighbors better.

Border issues

1. Special economic zones along India-Bangladesh border, especially in Meghalaya and Assam should be set up.
2. States should focus more on the development and security of the border areas.
3. Sentiments of the people of Arunachal Pradesh should be taken into consideration by the central government while discussing the frameworks for resolution of the border dispute with China.
4. Matching infrastructure and military capability should be build to ensure peace and enable negotiations from a position of strength.

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