

# Security Challenges and the Management of the India–Myanmar Border

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## Security Challenges and the Management of the India–Myanmar Border

Pushpita Das

**Abstract:** Being highly porous, poorly guarded and located along a remote, under-developed, insurgency-prone region and proximate to one of the world's largest five opium producing areas, the India–Myanmar border is vulnerable to the activities of insurgents and drugs and arms traffickers as well as criminals. Although the Indian government has been alive to the threats that emanate from a poorly guarded India–Myanmar international border, its attention towards the problem has been woefully inadequate. Given that poor security along the India–Myanmar border poses a challenge to India's security, it is imperative that India strengthens security of the border and redoubles its efforts to meaningfully engage Myanmar to effectively manage this border.

### Introduction

Following the abrogation of the 14-year ceasefire with the Indian government, the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K) on March 27, 2015 escalated violence by carrying out a series of attacks on the Indian security forces. In one such attack on June 4, 2015, the NSCN-K ambushed an army convoy in the Chandel district of Manipur killing 18 army personnel and injuring 11 others.<sup>1</sup> Earlier in April and in May 2015, the group had attacked the army and Assam Rifles in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland respectively, killing 11 soldiers. These attacks coupled with apprehensions of further attacks compelled the Indian army to launch counter-insurgency operations against the NSCN-K. Since the insurgents slipped out of India and hid in their camps in Myanmar, the army had to conduct strikes on these camps located along the international border.<sup>2</sup> The abrogation of the ceasefire agreement by the NSCN-K and the subsequent series of attacks by the group on the Indian security forces and the counter-insurgency operations, thus, brought to the fore the nature of threats India faces along its border with Myanmar.

Border security as a subject of public-policy agenda and academic interest has gained prominence after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States. During the decade before these attacks, border security was not considered a national security matter even though the forces of globalisation facilitated the increased movement of people, goods and capital across borders without being hindered by controls exercised by national governments.<sup>3</sup> But the events of 9/11, which saw 19 terrorists from 4 different countries hijacking commercial airplanes to attack US targets, revealed

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the flip side of globalisation; namely, the easy movement of nefarious elements across borders alongside the legitimate movement of people and goods. The fact that these terrorists could enter the US without raising suspicion among immigration authorities highlighted the importance of putting in place effective border controls. Thus, securing the borders by regulating the overwhelming flow of people, vehicles and containers as well as filtering out dangerous elements became policy objectives for governments worldwide. In contrast, in academia, the study of borders and borderlands adopted approaches that were very different. Some scholars saw borders as institutional constructs of the state with its policy of inclusion and exclusion based on national security concerns.<sup>4</sup> Others focused on the socio-economic and cultural spaces of the borderlands and argued that, in the brave new world of the post-Cold War era, these official constructs are being challenged by 'national communities' as well as by market forces.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have tended to argue that in order to formulate effective border security policies, emphasis should be on studying the borderland 'realities' and their interplay with government practices. Understanding the security policies of the neighbouring countries as well as interstate cooperation across borders is also deemed vital for the formulation of effective border security policies.<sup>6</sup>

In India, the Kargil War of 1999, the events of 9/11, and the terrorist attack on parliament in 2001 propelled policymakers to redouble focus on securing borders through better border management practices. Accordingly, the union government increased investments in security personnel, building fences and installing identification and detection devices as well as integrating the borderlands through developmental schemes. These government initiatives, in turn, fuelled scholarly interest in the study of borders and borderlands. Yet the academic focus has largely been on the socio-economic, cultural and ethnic milieus of the borderlands. Issues such as illegal migration, trafficking, smuggling, marginalisation of border inhabitants, and their acts of resistance to government's border policies have all been analysed in great detail.<sup>7</sup> The xenophobic dimensions of border security, fencing, and 'militarisation' of border controls are also topics that have been studied extensively.<sup>8</sup> These studies highlight the 'imprecise fit between nations and states', and challenge the official narratives on borders and borderlands. They are, in general, critical of the government and its policies.

While issues of marginalisation of the border inhabitants and the hardships they endure because of the artificial divide imposed by national borders are important topics of enquiry, equally important are the issues of border security and border control which constitute the first line of defence against external threats and challenges. Since the security and well-being of a state and its people depend on secure borders and well-integrated borderlands, states naturally tend to view the exercise of control over borders as being one of their more fundamental tasks. Establishing and maintaining control over borders through effective security policies, thus, comprises the core activity of governments. Given that the Indian State has been increasing its presence along its borders through various policies and schemes, it is important to study and evaluate its actions and the factors impelling them.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, this article studies the Indian government's approach to the India–Myanmar border and analyses how it has been seeking to secure the international border and integrate the borderland through a comprehensive strategy. In this context, the article provides an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the India–Myanmar border such as

the existence of strong cross-border ethnic and socio-economic links which render it vulnerable to various threats and challenges. It critically discusses the policies adopted by the Indian government over the years and forwards some suggestions to better secure and manage the India–Myanmar border.

### **Characteristics of the India–Myanmar border**

Security challenges along the India–Myanmar border are primarily non-conventional in nature, such as cross-border movement of insurgents, trafficking of narcotics and drugs, gunrunning, smuggling of wildlife and essential items, etc. The susceptibility of the India–Myanmar border to these threats and challenges is primarily due to the nature and location of the international border. The international border between India and Myanmar has been delineated in the India–Burma Boundary Agreement of March 10, 1967 except for the northern tri-junction (where India, Myanmar and China meet), which is pending resolution of the India–China border dispute. The demarcation of the rest of the international border had been completed, even though disagreements regarding the alignment of the border at a few stretches between the two countries remained. In all, the dispute over the location of nine pillars along the international border in Manipur sector remained ‘unresolved’.<sup>10</sup> This ‘unresolved’ border stretch did not cause any problem between the two countries in the initial years as large portions along the international border still remained un-administered and both India and Myanmar were preoccupied with addressing other internal problems. But as both the governments started bringing these areas under their respective jurisdictions, reports began to be received of intrusions by either the Assam Rifles or the Myanmar Army in each other’s territory.<sup>11</sup>

In most cases, it led to tensions between the local people and the security forces of the two countries. In particular, locals residing in the disputed tracts in Manipur have been alleging for a long time that the Myanmar army regularly intrudes into Indian territory and destroys their houses in a bid to occupy large tracts of land. In fact, one such incident in 2013 led to heightened tensions in the affected area. On August 22, 2013, local villagers alleged that the Myanmar army had tried to set up a camp by felling trees in Hollenphai village near border pillar no. 76 in Manipur. Despite the Indian government’s denial that no such intrusion into Indian territory by the Myanmar army had taken place, the local people were not mollified and they continued to protest against alleged harassment by the ‘intruders’.<sup>12</sup> Since then, such incidents have been reported at regular intervals in the local media.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to being ‘unresolved’ in a few patches, the border with Myanmar is extremely porous. The porosity of the international border stems from three factors: (a) superimposed border; (b) Free Movement Regime (FMR); (c) difficult terrain. The border cuts across the sociocultural and economic landscape of the region. Even though the border follows the ‘traditional’ boundary of watersheds and rivers, its demarcation has left several communities divided. The Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Chins and other tribes who reside in the region saw their kith and kin separated by the international border and forced to live as citizens of two different countries. However, in spite of the artificial separation, these tribes continue to maintain strong trans-border social and economic relations with their clan members as their loyalties remain for their clan first and then for the country. Such strong trans-border ethnic ties do not augur well for the country because they have impaired the nation-building

process in the region and delayed the crystallisation of the international border into lines dividing two sovereign countries.

The existence of FMR further hindered the firming-up of the border between India and Myanmar. The Indian government had realised that areas across the international border comprise a single socio-economic space for the tribes, and the location of the border amidst it had created hurdles for them. In view of this realisation, the Indian and the Myanmar governments arrived at a tacit understanding to allow the tribespeople to travel on either side of the international border for a stipulated distance without any visa and passport restrictions. The tribespeople were allowed to carry items equivalent to a headload. In addition, people from Myanmar could stay for 72 hours in India and Indians for 24 hours in Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> This unique arrangement is referred to as FMR. While the FMR helped the tribes continue maintaining their age-old ties, it has been observed that the provision was exploited by the Indian insurgents to cross over to Myanmar to receive training in arms, establish safe havens and re-enter India to carry out subversive attacks.<sup>15</sup>

The terrain and location of the India–Myanmar border also adds to its vulnerability. The topography along the border ranges from high mountains in the north to hills and river channels in the south. The entire border area is also heavily forested. Such a terrain does not lend itself easily to the construction of means of transportation and communication, and, as a result, the border area remains sparsely populated and reduces the levels of development. The absence of roads, communication links and other border-guarding infrastructure also adversely affects policing as it hampers the easy and rapid movement of the border-guarding forces along the border. Proximity of the India–Myanmar border to the ‘Golden Triangle’ has made it a conduit through which opium, heroin and other synthetic drugs are smuggled into as well as out of the country. Trafficking of drugs and narcotics through the border has made the Northeast region not only a transit hub, but also a destination for these trafficked drugs and narcotics.

Importantly, the India–Myanmar border traverses a region ravaged by insurgencies and ethnic clashes which contribute to its insecurity. In the wake of India’s independence, the union government’s efforts to integrate the people residing in these remote areas into the Indian mainstream were met with resistance from various sections. The tribal elite had argued that since people of the region belong to a different racial stock and their sociopolitical and economic lives are different from that of the mainland, they do not belong to India. Subsequently, the Naga National Council (NNC) rose in revolt in 1956, a separatist insurgency began in Manipur in 1964, and the Mizo National Front (MNF) rebelled in 1966. In later years, a number of insurgent movements espousing causes of different ethnic groups such as the Hmars, the Kukis, the Reangs, etc. engulfed the entire region. These insurgencies which challenge the Indian State and advocate a separate homeland for ‘their people’ by redrawing the country’s external borders not only impacted the nation-building process in this region adversely, but also stalled its economic development.

*Threats and challenges along the India–Myanmar border**Cross-border movement of insurgents*

The June 4, 2015 incident in which insurgents belonging to the NSCN (K) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) killed 18 army personnel in an ambush in Manipur highlighted the fact that one of the most potent threats to national security along the India–Myanmar border is the ease with which insurgents can cross the international border and hide in their bases located in the neighbouring country. The shelter and support that the insurgents receive from across the border has been one of the most important factors which has helped them in sustaining their rebellion even when faced with the superior might of the Indian security forces.

Since the inception of insurgency in the Northeast in the 1950s, the Naga, Mizo, Meitei and Assamese insurgents have been crossing over into Myanmar to set up bases, especially in the Chin State and Sagaing Region of Myanmar, where they can rest, recoup, train, plan and launch future offensives and hide when pursued by the Indian security forces. Tacit approval of the Myanmarese government and fraternal ties with other insurgent groups had facilitated the establishment of these safe havens in Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> The presence of strong trans-border ethnic linkages among local people has also been instrumental in providing shelter and succour to the insurgents across the border. Many of the insurgent groups when chased by the Indian security forces have been able to find shelter across the border among their own kinsmen who are sympathetic towards their cause. Incidentally, almost all these camps are located closer to the international border because being nearer to settlements along the border allows the villagers to supply these camps with food and other essential items without difficulty and without attracting the attention of the Indian security forces. But in the wake of the June 9, 2015 military operations, the militants were reportedly forced to relocate further inside Myanmar territory.<sup>17</sup> It is estimated that around 15 to 20 camps belonging to different Indian insurgent groups are operating from Myanmar.

Moreover, fraternal ties established between different insurgent groups active in Northeast India among themselves as well as with those active in Western Myanmar have acted as a force multiplier.<sup>18</sup> These ties have helped these insurgent groups to receive training, shelter, finances and weapons, as well as to establish links with governments hostile to India. For example, in the initial phase of insurgency, the NNC had forged ties with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) active in Myanmar which helped the Naga rebels establish contact with China for receiving training and weapons. The KIO also extended all possible logistical help to the Naga insurgents en route.<sup>19</sup> The first 353-strong batch of Naga insurgents had reached Yunan through Myanmar's Kachin state in January 1967.<sup>20</sup> From 1967 until 1980, when China stopped helping the insurgents under its policy of 'export of revolution', it had trained several batches of Northeast insurgents.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to facilitating training, support and logistics, these bases also provide an opportunity for various insurgent groups to work together against the Indian establishment under a single banner. In 1990, four insurgent groups—the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the NSCN-K, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Kuki National Army (KNA)—had formed the Indo-Burmese Revolutionary Forum (IBRF) 'to build a united struggle for the independence of Indo-Myanmar'.<sup>22</sup> The IBRF, however, was a failure as groups espousing different ethnic causes—often in opposition to others—found it difficult to reconcile their

differences and work unitedly. Another attempt at working jointly by the Northeast insurgent groups was made on April 17, 2015, when four groups—the NSCN-K, the ULFA (Independent), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Songbijit (NDFB-S) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO)—formed a joint forum called the United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA). The joint forum is headquartered at Taga north of Singkaling Hkamti in Sagaing Region in Myanmar, a stronghold of the NSCN-K.<sup>23</sup> Such fora not only help offset disadvantages in terms of shelter, training camps, weapons and finance, but also provide an opportunity for many rebels to operate out of its traditional areas of influence. The attacks of June 4, 2015 in Manipur by cadres of NSCN-K, which is not their traditional area of operation, bears testimony to this fact.

### *Trafficking of narcotics and drugs*

Trafficking of narcotics and drugs as well as weapons is rampant along the India–Myanmar border. Myanmar in the ‘Golden Triangle’ remains the second-largest producer of illicit opium in the world after Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> While the bulk of the heroin (80 to 85 per cent) produced in the region is trans-shipped to the international market through the Myanmar–Thailand and Myanmar–China routes, a small quantity enters India through the porous India–Myanmar border. The small quantity of heroin seized indicates that trafficking of narcotics along this border is only for personal consumption rather than for commercial purposes. At the same time, it could be argued that the low narcotics seizure figures could also be because of poor vigil along the international border.<sup>25</sup> The fact that officials continue to seize consignments of heroin in Guwahati and other cities in the region indicates that trafficking of narcotics is witnessing an increasing trend along this international border. In addition to heroin, a rise in the smuggling of psychotropic drugs from India to Myanmar has also been witnessed. Large quantities of codeine-based medicinal preparations such as corex, phensedyl, buprenorphine, spasmoporxyvon, etc. have been smuggled into Myanmar from India. Precursor chemicals such as ephedrine, pseudo-ephedrine and acetic anhydride used for the manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and heroine are trafficked from India into Myanmar to cater to the demands of numerous mobile laboratories located in the ‘Golden Triangle’. Seizures of ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine by anti-narcotics officials in the Northeast indicate an increasing trend of trafficking of these chemicals from India to Myanmar as well.<sup>26</sup>

Heroin and ATS produced in the ‘Golden Triangle’, especially in Myanmar, are trafficked into India through the states of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland from Bhamo, Lashio and Mandalay. The most important route is the one which starts from Mandalay, continues to Monya and Kalewa and then bifurcates to enter India at two points. The first moves northwards, enters Moreh in Manipur through Tamu and travels thence to Imphal and Kohima via National Highway-39. The second branch moves southwards and enters Champai in Mizoram through Rihkhadar.<sup>27</sup> Moreh, Champai, Dimapur and Guwahati have become hubs for narco trafficking. Reverse trafficking of precursor chemicals from India to Myanmar also takes place through the same route. Ephedrine is diverted from factories in south India to Kolkata and Guwahati from where they are trafficked to Myanmar overland. But traffickers also resort to circuitous routes to avoid detection. For instance, ephedrine from Chennai

to Kolkata or Guwahati is transported through Delhi.<sup>28</sup> In addition, opium produced illicitly along the Indo–Myanmar border especially in Manipur and Mizoram is reportedly transported to Myanmar for the manufacture of heroin, which is again smuggled back into India.<sup>29</sup> Medicinal preparations are also smuggled out of India to Myanmar using the same routes.

Increased trafficking of narcotics and drugs through the India–Myanmar border has serious implications not only for the security of the region, but also for the societal fabric. Easy availability of heroin and synthetic pharmaceuticals along the border region has resulted in their increased abuse among the local population. It has also brought with it the added scourge of HIV/AIDS as many addicts share intravenous syringes to inject drugs into themselves. The use of drug money to finance insurgency and terrorism has serious implications for the security of the country. It has been a widely held view among the security establishment that the Northeast insurgent groups do not directly participate in drug trafficking to generate funds; they generate funds indirectly from the drug trade by providing protection to the drug mafias and guaranteed safe transit of the drug consignments through their area in return for money. It has been reported that both the factions of the NSCN (Issak-Muviah and Khaplang) collect 20 per cent of the value of drugs that pass through their areas of influence in Nagaland.<sup>30</sup> However, smaller groups such as the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) are increasingly getting involved in drug trafficking as they find drug trafficking extremely lucrative to raise funds.<sup>31</sup>

### *Gunrunning*

While militancy requires funds, support, recruits and infrastructure to thrive, weapons and munitions constitute a major requirement for its sustenance. The ability of any militant group to procure and maintain a flow of weapons is essential for its military strength to threaten the state and challenge public order. Military strength of a group also influences its ability to gain attention, public support and new recruits. In this respect, the Northeast insurgent groups have been able to acquire weapons quite easily from various sources. In the initial years, they received weapons from China and Pakistan as well as from other Myanmar-based insurgent groups. In later years, the Indian insurgent groups were able to access the covert arms markets of Southeast Asia with the help of the KIA and Karen National Union (KNU).<sup>32</sup> In the late 1990s, the Yunnan mafia, which has access to the Chinese state-run ordinance factories, emerged as another source of weapons for the insurgent groups.<sup>33</sup> It is believed that in an attempt to turn the state-run ordinance factories into profit centres, the Chinese state-run company Norinco started selling huge quantities of weapons even to mafia groups based in Yunnan.<sup>34</sup> Lately, the Myanmar-based rebel group, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), has become the ‘principle supplier’ of Chinese arms to the Northeast insurgents.<sup>35</sup>

While the bulk of the weapons purchased from the black markets in Thailand and Cambodia are shipped through the Andaman Sea to the Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh, and thereafter to different parts of the Northeast through the porous India–Bangladesh border,<sup>36</sup> some of the arms and ammunition are also smuggled overland through the India–Myanmar border with the help of Chin and Arakanese insurgents. These weapons are often brought in as headloads by the Indian insurgents and the local villagers which are seldom checked by the border-guarding forces. Routes for

smuggling of weapons along the India–Myanmar border are similar to that of drug trafficking. Weapons produced in China are routed across the Burma border at Ruili and then trucked via Lashio, Mandalay and Monywa to enter the Indian border<sup>37</sup> through Phek, Chandel, Churachandpur and Champai.<sup>38</sup> Mizoram, in recent years, has emerged as the most preferred route through which weapons are smuggled into the Northeast. One of the reasons for this is that the state has remained peaceful for decades with no militant movements. As a result, the vigil along the border has been relaxed as compared to other states along the international border.<sup>39</sup>

### *Smuggling and informal trade*

Smuggling of essential items as well as forest products is quite rampant along the India–Myanmar border. Interestingly, it has been observed that opening the border trade routes have also resulted in large-scale smuggling of contrabands through the trading posts. For instance, at the Zokhawthar land customs station, between 2009 and 2013, a total of 106 cases of smuggling amounting to Rs. 2.1 crore had been detected.<sup>40</sup> Ready-made garments, foreign liquor, footwear, electronic items, toys, *zarda* and *khaini* are the items which are smuggled the most through Zokhawthar. The enormity of the volume of the smuggled items can be ascertained from the fact that in Aizawl a number of retail shops selling these smuggled items have sprung up and are doing brisk business.<sup>41</sup>

In Manipur, the traditional barter trade (or informal trade) through Gate no. 2 at Namphalong market in Myanmar has been flourishing for two decades now. Since there are no restrictions on the kind of goods that can be exchanged as it falls under the ambit of trade through the traditional barter mechanism, items such as Chinese/Korean-made blankets, ready-made garments from Thailand, Chinese-made electronic goods, household items such as crockery, appliances, precious stones, etc. are freely bought from this market and transported through the border into India by human couriers in headloads. Similarly, items such as pharmaceuticals, wooden furniture, etc. are exported from India through the same route with the full knowledge of the customs officials.<sup>42</sup> The security and law enforcement personnel stationed at the gate check the headloads only for contraband and let other commodities pass through the border.<sup>43</sup>

Wildlife products such as rhino horns, tiger teeth and other herbs and plants are also smuggled through the India–Myanmar border for the markets of Southeast Asia where there is a huge demand for these products as ingredients for traditional medicines and aphrodisiacs.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the horns collected from poached rhinos in Assam reach Dimapur from where they are sent to international markets through the India–Myanmar border.<sup>45</sup>

### *Management of the India–Myanmar border*

The Indian government's approach towards management of the India–Myanmar border has been influenced primarily by the country's relations with Myanmar, cross-border ethnic ties, and the persistence of insurgencies in the Northeast. Since bilateral relations on the whole have been cordial, India does not face any conventional threat from Myanmar and consequently this international border never witnessed heavy deployment of defence forces, unlike the borders with Pakistan and

China. Only small contingents of Assam Rifles were deployed to maintain peace and order along the border areas. As mentioned earlier, the policymakers in New Delhi have always been sensitive to the spatial spread of the tribes across the border and their close socio-economic linkages. They tried to facilitate the continuance of such cross-border ties through FMR, which in turn partially opened the border. However, persistent insurgencies compelled the government of India to rethink its policy towards its border with Myanmar. It tried to manage the border with Myanmar by employing a comprehensive strategy which comprised guarding the border against infringements by insurgents and smugglers, regulating the movement of people and goods along the border, development of the border areas and instituting bilateral mechanisms to resolve border problems with Myanmar.

### *Guarding the border*

For ensuring its physical security, the Assam Rifles is deployed as the border-guarding force along the India–Myanmar border under the principle of ‘one border one force’. However, out of 46 battalions, only 15 are deployed exclusively for border-guarding purposes and the rest are for counter-insurgency operations.<sup>46</sup> These 15 battalions are, however, not deployed at the border or spread along the entire border but are clustered as company-operated bases (COBs) stationed deep inside. These COBs are established at locations which provide better reconnaissance and are close to population centres. Such a deployment pattern of the border guarding forces was undertaken for two reasons: (a) the need to protect the population centres in the hinterland, and (b) to control the access routes for infiltration. Besides, rugged terrain, a sparse population, lack of roads, absence of accompanying infrastructure, and shortage of manpower also hindered the deployment of the Assam Rifles closer to the border. At present, the maximum number of battalions (eight) are deployed in Manipur which suffers the most from insurgency and has the maximum infiltration and trafficking routes.

In addition to the deployment of Assam Rifles, the Indian government also decided to build a 10 km fence along the international border at Moreh (between pillars nos. 79 and 81) in Manipur which is most porous to insurgents and traffickers. Significantly, the decision to construct a fence has been fraught with opposition, both externally and internally. First, the Myanmar government objected to the construction of the fence, but the matter was resolved after negotiations and the construction of the fence was allowed. However, a caveat that the fence should be built after leaving a 10 m ‘no construction zone’ along the international border was imposed by Myanmar.<sup>47</sup> Construction of the fence began in 2010 and by March 2013 around 4 km of the border was fenced.<sup>48</sup> But the construction had to be stopped in August 2013 after the locals protested that the construction of the fence inside the Indian territory because of Myanmar’s objections would result in Manipur losing substantial portions of its territory to Myanmar. They demanded that the union government should resolve the issue of disputed border pillars with Myanmar and conduct a joint survey of the border before constructing the fence.<sup>49</sup>

### *Regulating the traffic at the border*

Traffic along the India–Myanmar border is regulated through three officially designated entry/exit points. These are Moreh in Manipur, Zokhawthar in Mizoram and

Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh. The immigration point at Pangsau Pass is only open for local tribespeople. An Agreement on Land Crossing was signed between India and Myanmar in May 2018 which facilitated movement of people across the international border on the basis of visas and passports.<sup>50</sup> On August 8, 2018, the Myanmar government opened the international border for cross-border travel from India. Earlier, 'Indians travelling to Myanmar had to hire a licensed guide for about \$60 a day in addition to the special land route permit from the authority.'<sup>51</sup>

Further, the FMR allows the tribespeople to travel on either side of the border without any visa. Earlier the stipulated distance under the FMR was 25 miles, but because of the raging Naga, Mizo and Meitei insurgencies during the 1960s, the Indian government was forced to reconsider the FMR. Accordingly, it decided in August 1968 to reduce the distance of free movement to 40 km and introduced permits for crossing the border.<sup>52</sup> This provision remained in force for next 40 years. Growing incidents of drug and arms trafficking through the India–Myanmar border during the 1990s and early 2000s again compelled the Indian government to further reduce the FMR limits. Consequently, in 2010 the government limited the distance under FMR to 16 km and tribespeople were allowed to cross the international border only through 3 officially designated points.<sup>53</sup> Incidentally, no formal agreement on the free movement of tribes across their shared border existed between India and Myanmar.<sup>54</sup> The agreement on Land Crossings has regularised and standardised the FMR so that the facility is available only to genuine tribespeople residing in both the countries.

Besides movement of people, both formal and informal trade is carried out along the international border. India and Myanmar started border trade from Moreh in April 1995 and from Zokhawthar in 2004. Border trade takes place according to the mutually agreed official list of items. The trade was carried on through the barter system as no banking facilities were available in the remote border areas. Initially, only 22 items were allowed to be traded, but in subsequent years more items were added to the trade list. The list was expanded to include 18 more items in 2008 and an additional 22 items were added in 2012.<sup>55</sup> Border trade has registered substantial growth in the last three years from US\$14.41 million in 2011–2012 and US\$ 38.63 million in 2012–2013 to US\$ 48.63 million in 2013–2014.<sup>56</sup> However, in December 2015, the barter system of trading through Moreh was abolished as banks were established on both sides of the border.<sup>57</sup> Normal trade between India and Myanmar through Moreh had started in 2008.

While there has been a steady increase in the volume of traffic of both passengers and cargo across the border, commensurate infrastructure to facilitate their smooth flow has not been put in place. For instance, the land customs stations at Moreh and Zokhawthar do not have scanners, X-ray machines or machines to detect forged documents besides other facilities such as warehousing or parking. Moreover, the land customs station and the immigration checkpoints are located far apart and there is no coordination between the two.<sup>58</sup> Lack of infrastructure and coordination among various regulatory and law enforcement agencies at the borders is quite apparent, causing disruptions and harassment for the passengers and traders besides increasing the transaction costs.

To address these problems and to facilitate the smooth flow of people and goods, the Government of India decided to upgrade the land customs station at Moreh into an integrated check post (ICP). The ICP is designed to house all the regulatory

agencies such as customs, immigration and quarantine as well as law enforcement personnel under one roof for better coordination. It will have state-of-the-art scanners and detection equipment as well as support facilities such as parking, warehousing, banking, restaurants, etc.<sup>59</sup> Implementation of the scheme to construct the ICP, however, has been excruciatingly slow. One of the main factors which obstructed the early construction of the ICP was delay in land acquisition. Even after successful acquisition of the land in 2010, construction of the ICP could commence only in April 2013 after required clearances from various ministries were procured. Unfortunately, the construction had to be suspended in July 2013 as Myanmar objected to the construction, claiming that the land on which the ICP was being built belonged to it.<sup>60</sup> However, by December 2013 the work resumed and is expected to be operationalised by 2019.

### *Development of border areas*

The India–Myanmar border area is plagued by pervasive underdevelopment resulting from lack of connectivity, infrastructural development, and a small and unproductive economic base. Low levels of economic development and employment opportunities have resulted in instilling a sense of frustration and disaffection among the people of this region against the Indian State. Realising the importance of developing the border areas and providing means of livelihood to the people in these remote areas, the Indian Government extended the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) to the region in 1993–1994. The programme aims to meet the special development needs of the people living in remote and inaccessible areas situated near the international border as well as to provide them with a livelihood. Unfortunately, the intended goals of the BADP and border trade to improve the living conditions of the border people is far from being achieved. As far as BADP is concerned, most of the funds provided remain unutilised due to corruption and faulty schemes. The local people, for whose benefit the entire programme is envisioned, are at best kept ignorant about various schemes as decisions are taken at higher levels. The absence of local participation in any decision making process has prevented the programme from devising schemes which are beneficial to the residents in these areas. It also encouraged opaqueness in financial dealings, as funds meant for development of the border areas are either siphoned off by the corrupt bureaucrats and politicians or are utilised in schemes outside the border areas. In most instances, development funds lie unused due to a lack of any plans.<sup>61</sup>

Along with BADP, cross-border trade as per the prevailing customary practices including the border *haats* is also encouraged as an alternative means of earning for the border people. The idea is to allow the border people to trade their surplus produce in exchange for essential commodities. Border trade is carried out at Zokhawthar and Pangsau Pass. The potential of border trade also is not fully exploited because the trade basket consists only of limited items, most of which are of low commercial value. Also, restrictions placed on the value of goods to be traded under the barter system makes trade unviable. Nevertheless, realising that border trade caters more meaningfully to fulfilling the day-to-day needs of border people, India and Myanmar had agreed to open more points along the border to allow local trade across the border. In all, 10 spots have been identified along the border to open *haats* across four states besides exploring the opening of two new Border Trade Points at Pangkhuwa and

Zoninpuri.<sup>62</sup> Regrettably, the Myanmar government has gone slow on these proposals, citing lack of infrastructure in the border areas and poor trading potential.<sup>63</sup>

### *Cooperation with Myanmar*

India and Myanmar face similar problems along their borders—be it insurgency, trafficking of narcotics and drugs, gunrunning, or smuggling of wildlife and essential products. This convergence of security interests between the two countries provides India and Myanmar an opportunity to cooperate with each other. In the decades following independence, the eruption of Naga insurgency in India also caused major concern to Myanmar as it also had a substantial Naga population within its territory. In order to prevent a trans-border Naga insurgency, Myanmar cooperated with India by trying to stop the Naga insurgents from crossing over to their side of the border.<sup>64</sup> Such actions against the Indian rebels were carried out by the Myanmar government in the subsequent decades as well, albeit the frequency and intensity of such operations decreased as relations between the two countries gradually soured.<sup>65</sup>

In the early 1990s, as the situation along the border got progressively worse with increased illegal inflow of drugs, weapons and other contraband, India reached out to Myanmar once again and sought its cooperation to improve security along their shared border. Consequently, in January 1994, both the countries signed an agreement for the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border as well as a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation between civilian and border authorities and a border trade agreement.<sup>66</sup> These agreements paved the way for establishing several bilateral institutional interactions at various levels such as meetings between government officials, border-guarding personnel, surveyors and anti-narcotics officials of both the countries. Various matters related to security, drug trafficking, movement of people and insurgents, border trade and border management are discussed in these meetings.<sup>67</sup>

India's constructive engagement with Myanmar resulted in a couple of operations against the Indian insurgents since the mid-1990s, but they were not effective in significantly reducing the levels of insurgency-related violence in the Northeast.<sup>68</sup> However, the imperative to deal with insurgency in the Northeast compelled India to reach out to Myanmar and deepen bilateral security cooperation and since 2002 it started providing weapons to Myanmar mostly for carrying out counter-insurgency operations.<sup>69</sup> Both the countries have also been reiterating that their territories will not be allowed 'to be used for training, sanctuary and other operations by terrorist and insurgent organizations and their operatives'.<sup>70</sup> In a significant development, on May 8, 2014, India and Myanmar signed an MoU on border cooperation under which both sides agreed to establish close cooperation and mechanisms for exchange of information regarding movement of insurgents and flow of drugs and arms between their security forces. They also agreed to conduct coordinated patrolling along the border to fight insurgency, drug trafficking and illegal flow of weapons across their shared borders.<sup>71</sup> Realising that development of the border region is a must for the security of the border, both the countries expressed their commitment to it in a MoU on border area development signed in May 2012.<sup>72</sup>

Despite these positive developments, India's efforts, in sum, achieved mixed results largely because of Myanmar's ambivalent attitude towards the Indian insurgents. This is apparent from the fact that Myanmar, on the one hand, has acted against the interests of Northeast insurgents operating from its territory and has destroyed their camps and hideouts, resulting in the ebbing of insurgent activities in

the Northeast. On the other hand, it has been tolerant towards these insurgent camps, reinforcing the argument that the Myanmar army is ‘both unable and unwilling’ to drive the Indian insurgents from its territory.<sup>73</sup> While it is true that being poorly equipped and thinly stretched, the Myanmar army is unable to effectively control the border areas and, therefore, is incapable to act against the Indian insurgent groups, it is equally true that Myanmar had been following a policy of providing support to the Indian insurgent groups to use them as bargaining tools vis-à-vis India.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, at the local level, the Myanmar army officers have been accepting bribes and other offers from the Indian insurgents in exchange for safe havens and information to compensate for their poor living conditions.<sup>75</sup> Myanmar also does not appear to be warm towards opening up additional points across the border for border trade. Its reluctance can be observed from the fact that it has not improved transportation and communication links to the existing border-trading posts. It has also remained non-committal towards building infrastructure required for operationalising the newly agreed trading posts.<sup>76</sup>

### Conclusion

Proper border management is vital for the security of the country and it should be achieved through strengthening the security and development of the international border, both unilaterally as well as with the active cooperation with the neighbouring country. Given the security threats posed by a poorly guarded India–Myanmar border, the Government of India could undertake few remedial steps. To begin with, it should give the Assam Rifles the sole responsibility of guarding the India–Myanmar border. It should strengthen the force by providing adequate training, manpower and equipment. It is equally important to sensitise the people living along the international border about their strategic importance and encourage them to work as ‘eyes and ears’ for the border-guarding forces. This could be achieved through sustained community interaction programmes and expediting various schemes for development of infrastructure for the overall growth of the border areas. The border residents should also be encouraged to participate in their own economic development so that they do not indulge in criminal activities so that they develop a stake in keeping the border peaceful and crime free. Besides, international borders are best managed when neighbours cooperate to tackle the security challenges emanating from across the borders. For such cooperation to materialise, political and diplomatic initiatives require to be carefully crafted. India has been constructively engaging with Myanmar so that it remains friendly to India and cooperates in keeping the international border secure and peaceful. India has been partially successful in its efforts and, therefore, needs to increase and sustain its interactions with Myanmar for managing their shared border better.

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