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Guns, Blankets and Bird Flu*

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THE INDIA-MYANMAR BORDERLANDS: GUNS, BLANKETS AND BIRD FLU

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Abstract

The India-Myanmar border regions form a forgotten frontier in the Indian and global imagination. India's frontiers to the west (Pakistan), to the north (Tibet/China) and to the south (Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean) have always received greater attention. Today, however, the region representing the conjunction of India, China and Myanmar is returning to the centre of attention for a number of reasons both old and new. Violence ('Guns') has been endemic in the region since communities and peoples were rent asunder by the imposition and policing of officially demarcated borders between India and Myanmar. Yet, trade ('Blankets') – both formal and informal – has managed to carry on. What has added to the importance of the region in the eyes of the national capitals, is the increasing severity of transnational challenges such as drug-trafficking and the spread of diseases ('Bird Flu'). Together, these three factors have kept both a regional identity as well as specific community identities alive. This paper is an attempt to examine the region-building properties of these factors.

Résumé

Les régions frontalières entre l'Inde et la Birmanie constituent, dans l'imaginaire indien et global, une frontière oubliée, à la différence des frontières ouest (Pakistan), nord (Tibet/Chine) et sud (Sri Lanka et Océan Indien). Cette région située aux confluent de l'Inde, de la Chine et de la Birmanie suscite cependant aujourd'hui un regain d'intérêt. La région connaît une violence endémique (les « armes »), les populations et communautés locales ayant été déstructurées du fait de l'imposition et de la gestion des frontières indo-birmanes. Les échanges commerciaux formels et informels (les « couvertures ») restent cependant intenses. La montée d'enjeux transnationaux cruciaux (trafic de drogue, épidémies comme la grippe aviaire) fait de cette région frontalière un enjeu clé pour les pays concernés. Ces trois facteurs réunis ont permis de maintenir une identité régionale affirmée ainsi que des identités communautaires spécifiques. Ce texte s'emploie à discuter de la contribution respective de ces facteurs à la construction du régionalisme.

Keywords | Mots clés

North-east India, Myanmar, ethnic insurgencies, illegal trade, disease spread, Asian regionalism, regionalization, China
Nord-Est de l'Inde, Birmanie, soulèvements ethniques, commerce illégal, épidémie, régionalisme asiatique, régionalisation, Chine

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INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the cross-border micro-region that is the India-Myanmar borderland. The India-Myanmar border regions form a forgotten frontier in the Indian and global imagination. India's frontiers to the west (Pakistan), to the north (Tibet/China) and to the south (Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean) have always received greater attention. In part, this is a legacy left over from the colonial era when the compulsions of the Great Game meant that it was Afghanistan and Tibet that were the major security considerations for the British. However, this is also as much a result of how India's rulers in the immediate aftermath of Independence sought to deal with the bloodbath of the communal riots following Partition by viewing their control over Kashmir as a validation of their case for Indian secularism over the Pakistani claim for religion as the basis of nationhood. The southern frontiers were important in the past, as the gateway for the arrival of the European traders and (later) colonialists, and in the present day, as an important means of pressing India's claims to a maritime destiny. Meanwhile, the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka and the spectre of cross-border Tamil nationalism that this engendered also ensured that New Delhi kept a close watch on goings on down south.

By contrast, most of the region that is known today as Northeast India, had been even in British times and still earlier, largely cut off from the mainstream Indian psyche and never truly considered as part of the Indian mainland. Largely dominated by a multitude of ethnic groups, Northeast India remains difficult to access for most people from the rest of India. Even this access is possible in some areas only through special permits even for Indian citizens, leave alone foreigners. Northeast India that forms India's connection with Myanmar and onwards to Southeast Asia has been until very recently both literally and figuratively a forgotten corner of India. In recent years, however, New Delhi has sought to view Northeast India as an important factor in its outreach out towards its eastern neighbours especially in economic terms. Against this background, this essay attempts to examine in greater detail the problems hindering India's region-building efforts involving Northeast India and Myanmar. To this end, this essay views the India-Myanmar border regions as not just physical spaces but also as social and cultural spaces that involve the flows of people and goods, as an economic space that involves the flow of goods and services and as zones of vulnerability in both traditional and non-traditional security dimensions.

This essay is divided into eight sections. The first section examines briefly the processes of regionalism in Asia and India's involvement in these processes. The second section provides a short background to the micro-region¹ comprising

1 A micro-region is defined as existing between the 'national' and 'local' level different from

the northeast of India and its linkages with Myanmar. The third, fourth and fifth sections deal respectively with the security complex in the region (as signified by the title 'Guns'), the formal and informal economic exchanges that take place across the international frontier including smuggling ('Blankets') and the growing transnational nature of the challenges facing the region such as for example, disease spread that are also a result of the two previous dimensions ('Bird Flu'). The sixth section of the essay will describe the 'regional' properties of the Indo-Myanmar border areas. The seventh section discusses the prospects and problems of region-building or, in other words, of elevating the Indo-Myanmar borderlands comprising Northeast India and Myanmar into a more integrated and functional region. The final section draws together the major findings and conclusions.

1. INDIA AND ASIAN REGIONALISM

It is important to start with a brief examination of regional processes in Asia and India's place in these processes. The standard regional project on the Asian continent involves countries as a whole and with few exceptions have been aspirational (SAARC, APEC)² rather than effective. Even where they have been effective, they have been so as economic groupings (ASEAN) rather than in achieving greater political integration along the lines of the European Union (EU). Indeed, ambitions such as those Western Europe professed from quite early on following World War II, have largely been absent in the Asian context. It was considered enough in the post-colonial era, that countries did not come to blows or did not interfere in the each other's internal affairs. The most prominent regional organizations in Asia in the post-World War II period were usually security arrangements (CENTO, SEATO, FPDA)³ also led by extra-regional

macro- or 'world' regions that are made up of larger territorial units or sub-systems between the 'national' and 'global' level. See (Söderbaum & Taylor: 2008).

2 SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is a regional political and economic organization formed in 1985 at the initiative of Bangladesh comprising originally also India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal. Afghanistan became a member in 2007. Despite or because of strict conditions that it would not be a forum to make statements about each other's internal affairs, the organization has been constantly stymied in its functioning by the weight and depth of India-Pakistan discord over issues such as Kashmir. The APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) comprises over 20 countries of the Pacific Rim and was designed to facilitate greater economic cooperation and trade and investment facilitation but has found itself to be unfocused and often in competition with ASEAN.

3 CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) also known as the Baghdad Pact was a multilateral security organization formed in 1955 and lasted till 1979. It was modeled on the NATO and originally comprised Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom with the United States joining later. SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) formed in 1954 was also intended to serve as a NATO for the region. However, like CENTO, it too suffered from withdrawal of members at crucial times and was unable to unite in the face of the

powers such as the United States. And while some of these older organizations have disappeared (SEATO (1954-1977), CENTO (1954-1979)), new ones have emerged (SCO, ARF, CSTO⁴) and security considerations have remained constant in the region often hampering regional integration efforts well into the 21st century, even as the number of regional groupings with economic goals has grown in the post-Cold War era.

India meanwhile, has historically largely been a reluctant participant in Asian regional organizations. While being involved in global groupings such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)⁵ and the Commonwealth⁶, for much of the Cold War era, India has gained very little in real terms from its participation except in the form of opportunities to attack superpower hegemony in the global system. Meanwhile, India's participation in SAARC (formed in 1985) began with a great deal of apprehension over whether its smaller neighbours would use the opportunity to gang up against Indian 'hegemony.' While New Delhi's enthusiasm for the economic goals of the organization has grown particularly in the post-Cold War era, SAARC remains severely crippled by the heavy shadow of difficult Indo-Pak relations. India has therefore, shifted its attention increasingly to regional groupings to its east. It is an enthusiastic participant in the East Asia Summit (EAS)⁷ process calling, in fact, for greater institutionalization of this mechanism into the East Asian Community as opposed to the

communist threat in Indochina and eventually wound down in 1977. The FPDA (Five Power Defence Arrangements) formed in the wake of Britain's withdrawal from Southeast Asia comprise bilateral defence relationships between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore to come into operation if either of the latter two were to come under threat. Signed in 1971, the FPDA is however, largely really dependent on the US security guarantee in the region.

4 The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), formed in 2001 is an economic and security cooperation organization made up of China, Russia and all but one of the Central Asian Republics while the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) is another security organization comprised of the same set of members but for China and including also Armenia and Belarus. Established in 2002, it has been seen as a Russian attempt to undercut China's influence in Central Asia. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), founded in 1993 includes all the ASEAN member states together with the other major powers in the region and is designed to facilitate dialogue on political and security issues.

5 Founded in 1961, as an alternative to the Cold War-era alignments of the American and Soviet blocs, to allow countries to maintain a degree of independence in their foreign policies and actions, NAM comprises over a 100 countries today. However, the Movement has seldom been effective in any substantive manner in the post-Cold War era and even before it, the idea of being completely immune to pressure from the superpowers was essentially a fiction.

6 The Commonwealth of Nations or the British Commonwealth is an organization of countries that were nearly all of them a part of the former British Empire.

7 The EAS has 16 members including the major non-ASEAN members such as China, India, Japan, South Korea and Australia. It began its meetings in 2005 and has a somewhat uneasy relationship with other ASEAN forums such as the ASEAN+3 and non-ASEAN forums such as APEC.

privileging of the ASEAN+3 process (begun in 1999) that involves only China, Japan and South Korea (+3).

Crucially, India has also begun to acknowledge the importance of a sub-regional approach involving the development of its Northeast as a crucial component of any regional endeavour in its east. Indeed, Asian regional groupings include not only those that comprise whole countries (ASEAN+3) but also those that are intended to give a greater weight to particular regions within larger countries. In this latter category, falls the Kunming Initiative⁸ that was designed in 1999 to give a fillip to economic cooperation among sub-national entities such as the provinces of Northeast India and Yunnan province in China and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) formed in 1992 involving again Yunnan and later also Guangxi province in China and the other countries in the Mekong river basin area. Even here, however, India's suspicions of China have played a major role in scuttling the prospects of such organizations as the BCIM. India is a member however, of other regional economic organizations that do not involve China such as BIMSTEC and MGC⁹. However, a variety of issues namely, political conditions in Myanmar, distance and the lack of infrastructure connectivity and insurgency in Northeast India have meant that these organizations too have remained largely ineffective even if regular meetings of officials are held. It is obvious therefore, that political and security conditions in India's Northeast and in Myanmar combine to form a severe roadblock to India's regional economic aspirations even if the Sino-Indian relationship were to improve.

2. NORTHEAST INDIA AND MYANMAR – CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

The region commonly termed, 'Northeast India' is a completely landlocked part of India with only about four per cent of its external boundaries contiguous with the rest of India, and the remainder forming international frontiers with Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. It occupies about eight per cent of India's total land area and holds less than four per cent of its total population. Its administrative composition has changed several times since

8 More formally known as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum (BCIM) for Regional Economic Cooperation, it is intended to develop and improve physical infrastructure and connectivity and to ensure greater trade and tourism in the region.

9 BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) was formed in 1997 and includes the littoral states of Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand plus Bhutan and Nepal. The MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation) formed in 2000, very obviously excludes China comprising as it does India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The emphasis is once again on transportation linkages, trade and tourism among others.

Indian Independence in 1947 and it today comprises the eight provinces (called 'states' in India) of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. While much of India's administrative division into provinces has followed a linguistic basis and had been accomplished by the end of the 1950s, the provinces in the Northeast were several of them originally part of the larger provinces of Assam or Union Territories administered directly from New Delhi until the early 1970s when many attained the rank of full 'states'.¹⁰

Despite the low population compared with the rest of India, the region comprises the majority of the officially classified Scheduled Tribes of India which are ethnic minorities that receive affirmative action in government employment under provisions of the Indian Constitution. The various ethnic groups also receive a host of other special privileges, including rights to land and traditional forms of governance and in some instances, particularly in Northeast India, also exclusive ethnicity-based governance structures within larger provinces. However, such privileges have not been sufficient to mitigate the sense of discrimination and apathy that the people of this region continue to feel emanates from New Delhi and the rest of India in general. Also, inter-ethnic tensions within the region itself also continue unabated. Thus, while all the provinces of Northeast India are today full 'states' in the Indian Union, this has not reduced the number of demands from various ethnic groups – large and small – for separate and autonomous administrative arrangements within a larger province, separate provincial status or even full independence from India (Baruah: 2008). Thus, almost from the time of Indian Independence, Northeast India has been a hotbed of insurgencies and the Indian Army has been engaged in counterinsurgency operations from the 1950s¹¹.

The security dynamic in the Northeast really became an overriding concern for India only following the defeat to China in 1962¹². International attention on the Northeast of India has in fact, always been a result of the potential for Sino-Indian conflict in this region¹³. Meanwhile, the Chinese began arming insurgent

10 While Assam was a 'state' from the beginning, Nagaland became a full-fledged 'state' in 1963 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1986. In between, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura became 'states' in 1972, Mizoram in 1987. Sikkim which had been an independent kingdom was merged into the India Union in 1975, but became officially identified as part of the Northeast only in the 1990s.

11 For an overview of the various conflicts in the region see (Saikia: 2007).

12 For an overview of Indian foreign policy prior towards China prior to the Sino-Indian conflict see (Bhattacharjya: 1979, 2001). For an account of events directly leading up to the conflict see (Maxwell: 1997).

13 The Chinese claim the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which India actually only began to extend its reach into in response to the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950. In fact, the Indians had not until 1951 established a full-fledged administrative presence in Tawang

groups in the Northeast as part of their policy to keep India preoccupied and tied down to South Asia. Among the beneficiaries of this Chinese policy – which continued until 1978 – were the Naga insurgent movement and the Assamese separatist movement led by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). The Nagas had in fact, declared their ‘independence’ in 1947, as the British were withdrawing from India but were dismissed as being of little consequence by the powers that be in New Delhi. This led them soon to take up arms and the movement remains one of the oldest insurgencies anywhere in the world¹⁴.

Figure 1: Northeast India and Myanmar ¹⁵



– the Buddhist monastery town that is currently the major bone of contention in this sector of the Sino-Indian dispute.

14 For more on the Naga movement including a brief history, see (Srikanth & Thomas: 2005).

15 © Reuters. Source: <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/imagerepository/INmap239.jpg>

Myanmar meanwhile, is a 'state of concern' in Southeast Asia and the playground where a low-key Sino-Indian contest for influence is underway¹⁶. Myanmar's current military regime that took charge after a crackdown following the success of democratic elections in the country in 1988, is one of the world's most brutal and paranoid regimes. It has kept under almost continuous house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) that was victorious in 1988 and will in late 2010 hold elections that are far from likely to be free and fair and which the NLD is boycotting. From being one of the most prosperous and developed countries in the region following Independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar (previously called Burma) has descended into a slow spiral of conflict and poverty. The military has held the reins of power for much of this period and the breakdown of the country's original, forward-looking federal arrangement has resulted in decades of ethnic insurgencies against the central government in a situation similar to that in India's northeast.

Also given their location, it is natural to find that most ethnic groups in the northeast of India have linkages across international borders. A number of ethnic groups trace their roots back to regions in Yunnan in China or the Shan state in Myanmar. For example, many Naga tribes of Nagaland and Manipur in India are to be found also on the other side of the border in Myanmar, and so also the Kukis of Manipur and the Chins of Mizoram. The histories of migration of many ethnic groups are still preserved in folklore, cultural artifacts, and language among other things and it has been across what is today the India-Myanmar boundary that many of these migrations have taken place. These ethnic and historical connections have not been entirely broken in the post-colonial period; rather, they have been preserved in many instances and adapted to the changed circumstances created by international boundaries or in many instances ignored such artificial lines altogether. As the subsequent sections will explain this state of affairs has had led to a number of consequences both positive and negative and which have had and continue to have consequences for both process of state-driven regionalism and of regionalization.

3. 'GUNS' – INSURGENCIES AND THEIR CROSS-BORDER LINKAGES

Northeast India's ethnic insurgencies and together with the tensions emanating from the unresolved Sino-Indian boundary dispute on the one side and

¹⁶ For more on Sino-Indian rivalry in Myanmar see (Malik: 1994), (Selth: 1996), and (Egrettau: 2008).

Myanmar's own divided polity on the other places the region at a potent intersection of both internal and external security challenges for India. It is this complex of factors that is referred to by 'Guns' in the title of this essay.

Even from before Independence, many of India's border areas in the Northeast have required special passes known as Inner Line Permits in order for ordinary Indians from other parts of the country to access them. The Inner Line was so named after the British demarcation of the limits of their actual administrative reach which did not extend into the tribal regions bordering present-day Tibet in the north and Myanmar in the east. These regions which today comprise the provinces of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have been the site of some of the oldest separatist insurgencies in the country¹⁷. New Delhi's policy following Independence was one of closing off these regions in order to preserve and protect their ethnic and cultural heritage from being overwhelmed by mainstream India. Further, the China factor grew as a threat in the consciousness of Indian security planners following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950 and especially since the defeat in the 1962 conflict with China. Together, the combination of British colonial-era restrictions of access and post-Independence exoticization, rooted in an overwhelming security dynamic, was enough to alienate the multiple ethnic groups of this region. Starting with the Nagas, one after the other, several ethnic groups took up the gun to fight for secession from India, citing differences of culture and history but also neglect and injustice.

Given that the India-Myanmar boundary runs through dense jungle and over hills for much of its length runs through hill and due to the shared ethnic and cultural linkages, these insurgencies have managed to obtain sustenance and support from across it. Thus, for nearly 50 years now, India has been battling ethnic insurgencies in the Northeast run out of camps across the international frontier in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and Myanmar and for a time still further afield in China. While the boundary is demarcated¹⁸, it is extremely porous. Even today, simply examining the condition of boundary pillars is itself a regular and difficult task for the Indian Army¹⁹.

The Naga insurgency was supported by the Chinese Maoists beginning in 1962 (Garver: 2001) and until 1978 (Guruswamy & Singh: 2009) with insurgents

17 While Arunachal Pradesh does not have any of its ethnic groups engaged in armed insurgencies, its territory is used by Naga, Assamese and Bodo insurgent groups.

18 For a description of the history of the demarcation of this boundary see (Das: 2010a).

19 Interview with Indian Army officer, Arunachal Pradesh, December 2008. The Surveyor Generals of the two countries also meet to discuss plans for joint inspection, repairs, restoration and maintenance of boundary pillars. See (Das: 2010b).

being trained in both ideology and guerilla warfare in Yunnan and Tibet²⁰. Other insurgencies in the Northeast also drew support from the Chinese until 1978 as and when they came up. Prominent among these were the separatist United Liberation Front of Asom of the province of Assam, the Mizos of Mizoram province and the several Meitei insurgent groups from the province and former kingdom of Manipur²¹. Over time, new groups have emerged and several older groups have splintered into multiple factions. However, the inability to put down insurgencies in the Northeast once and for all except in the case of the Mizos in the late 1980s has to do with a combination of factors including a mix of popular support for their causes – often secession from India – the secret backing of local politicians, violence and extortion perpetrated by the insurgents, and/or safe havens in Myanmar (and Bangladesh).

The guns in this cycle of violence are believed to come from two main sources – Chinese manufacturers and Indochina. In both instances, the various ethnic armies that dominate the north of Myanmar and its borders with China and Thailand act as intermediaries. The weapons that circulate include Chinese-make AK-56s and Vietnam War-era American M-16 rifles funneled in from Laos²². While the Chinese have officially ceased support for insurgent activities against India, their arms still find their way into the hands of these groups through various mafia groups operating in its Yunnan province²³.

Northeast Indian insurgent groups pay for these arms by a combination of 'tax-collection' and extortion from rich businesses and both central and provincial government institutions and departments on the Indian side. Many of these groups in fact, run parallel governments and the profitability of these activities is indicated by the fact that many groups have split over conflicts over the spoils. Quite a few groups may in fact, be better termed as criminal gangs rather than armed political movements. Further, the same area or population might be taxed several times depending on the number of different armed groups present in an area. For instance, in Moreh in Manipur, a central government-sanctioned official

20 Interview with former Naga insurgent leader, Kohima, Nagaland, December 2008.

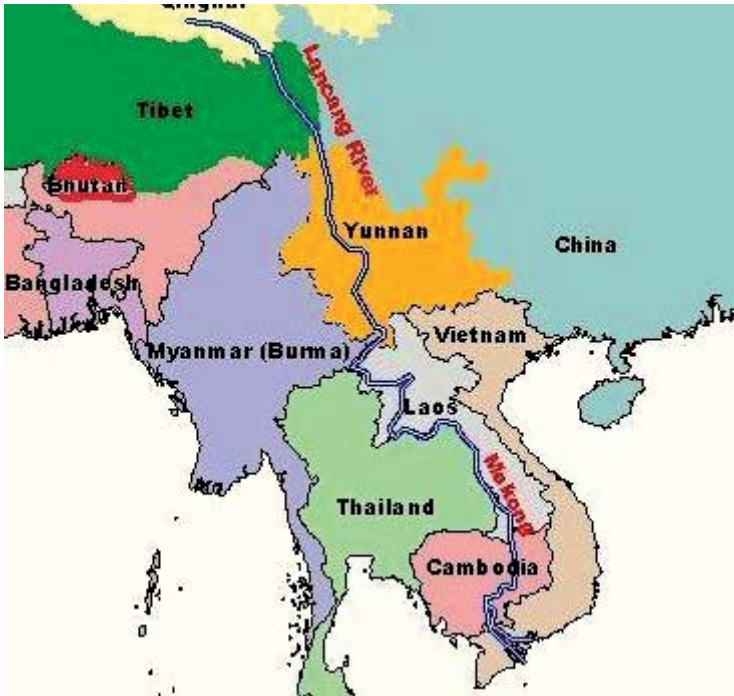
21 For more on the history of the linkages between Northeast Indian insurgent groups and Myanmar see Subir Bhaumik.

22 Interview with Indian Army officer, Manipur, December 2008.

23 See (Bhaumik: 2005). In a sense, while Beijing has washed its hands off politically from Northeast Indian insurgents, the involvement can be said to be of an indirect and non-ideological nature with the ethnic Wa and Kachin ethnic armies groups in the China-Myanmar borderlands – also formerly supported by the Chinese – acting as middlemen. Meanwhile, the production of illicit drugs and the money thus generated also play a huge role in the arms trade in the region. The aforementioned ethnic armies in Myanmar are involved in this trade with areas under their control forming part of the Golden Triangle of drug trade including also parts of Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

trading post with Myanmar, there are several major groups that operate such as the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah faction) (NSCN (I-M)), the Kuki National Front (KNF) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur's Meiteis (Routray: 2009). Among the biggest sufferers in this situation is the small ethnic Tamil community of traders, whose numbers have been dwindling over the years under pressure from these groups on their trade and businesses²⁴.

Figure 2: Northeast India, Myanmar and the Larger Neighbourhood²⁵



The domestic consequences of this violence for the region are huge with insecurity and extortion leading to brain drain and underdevelopment. The biggest spender in the region is the central government and in addition to being an often inefficient spender, this money in the form of government servants' salaries and in state enterprises is 'taxed' by the insurgents and thus ends up contributing to the financial support of the insurgents. In addition, the presence of the Indian Army

24 These Tamils include descendants of those who were originally taken to Burma by the British but were forced out of the country following Gen. Ne Win's military coup in 1962. After living for a time as refugees in Tamil Nadu in south India, they made their way overland back to the Indian side of the border with Burma hoping to return eventually to their homes.

25 Source: <http://www.dbr.nu/data/pubs/thesis/figs/map1.jpg>

is often seen as akin to the presence of an occupying army. Many decades of insensitive and often brutal armed operations have almost permanently turned the psyche of common people in the region as much against the central government and the Indian Army as against the insurgent groups. In many respects, the situation in the region forms a vicious cycle.

New Delhi has in order to overcome the problem of insurgent bases in the Northeast tried to enter into a pragmatic relationship with the current Myanmar military junta under what is called a 'constructive engagement' policy. Thus, in the mid-1990s, India reversed its policy of opposition to the junta and support for the opposition pro-democratic forces led by the NLD, and even sold some arms to the junta in order to win its support for operations against Indian insurgents on its soil. While there have been some partial successes, the evidence largely indicates that there is little to show for it. In some instances, Northeast Indian insurgent camps sit practically cheek by jowl with Myanmar army units and no action is taken because officers of the Myanmar army – an army that is poorly equipped and poorly paid – are bribed by these groups to leave them alone²⁶. India however, also continues its present policy towards Myanmar as part of its efforts to counter Chinese influence in that country.

4. 'BLANKETS' – CROSS-BORDER TRADE AND MIGRATION

'Blankets' is a reference to the formal and informal trade that has carried on in this region despite the security situation. In fact, neither the violence nor the existence of official borders dividing what was once upon a time, a common economic area with a long history of interactions and movements of people has hindered informal trade which is believed to be quite substantial. In fact, informal trade in addition to being a continuation of historical trade relations in the region is also a response to the lack of integration of the economies of the region with the mainstream Indian national economy. It must be remembered that Partition also affected the east of India, with the creation of East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh, cutting off access to the sea and limiting options for communication, including overland transport between mainland India and the Northeast.

Therefore, Northeast India remains among the most underdeveloped regions in India, and not just due to the poor security situation. Structurally too, the lack of proper physical infrastructure and telecom connectivity in addition to the usual pan-Indian problems of shortcomings in health and education infrastructure add to the challenges for economic development in this region²⁷. Meanwhile,

²⁶ Interview with Indian Army officer, Arunachal Pradesh, December 2008.

²⁷ Ironically, however, some of the border provinces in question namely, Nagaland

officially sanctioned border trade takes place after a fashion, limited by all the above factors in addition to highly restrictive and often outdated central government regulations on the number and quantities of goods that can be sold²⁸. Indeed, a lot of the trade whether along the Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh on the Stilwell Road, Moreh in Manipur or the Zokhawthar-Rih trading posts on the Mizoram (India)-Chin State (Myanmar) border actually is in the form of barter trade. Trade at the Pangsau Pass is rather more informal with traditional items being sold, fixed days on which trade takes place and only locals on both sides of the border are allowed to engage in trade²⁹. At Moreh and Zokhawthar there are much better developed customs stations and a higher volume of trade. As mentioned above, however, there are frequent ethnic clashes and blockades called by insurgent groups that disrupt trade and transport at Moreh.

Figure 3: Neighbours: Northeast India and Myanmar's Provinces³⁰



The state of both the trade and trading posts along the Indo-Myanmar border leaves much to be desired with little central government initiative owing to the and Mizoram, are almost 100 percent literate states due to their history of Christian proselytization and the rise of Christian missionary educational institutions as a result.

28 Under the India-Myanmar Agreement on Border Trade signed in 1994 only 22 items have been included in the trading list.

29 The Nagas and Kachins across the border in Myanmar are heavily dependent on markets in the small Arunachali hamlet of Nampong as the nearest towns from Pangsau village on the Myanmar side are over a hundred kilometers away with poor road connectivity. Every Friday of the month – referred to as Burma Day – Myanmar citizens from across the border are allowed to come into Nampong to trade. Meanwhile, on the 15th and 30th of every month – referred to as India Day – Indians are allowed to visit Myanmar for a brief period and with permission from the civilian authorities in Nampong with a contingent of the Indian Army's Assam Rifles manning checkpoints well before the Pass can be reached. These visits by Indians are mostly by officials and tourists and not usually for trade purposes.

30 Source: http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/42602000/gif/_42602363_india_burma2_map203.gif

overwhelming security considerations in New Delhi. This is despite provincial government interest in expanding facilities and trade as well as connections across the international border. There are for example few banking facilities available and in any case there is more Burmese Kyat per Indian Rupee (INR) to be had in the black market than through the official exchange rate. At Moreh, Indian citizens can cross over for a 24-hour stay to do business or whatever else with a pass costing INR10 – there is however, very little verification that is actually carried out by border authorities and there are many ways of slipping across without even paying this token amount. Once across the border, all items can be paid for using Indian currency³¹. This relaxed means of crossing over perhaps further incentivizes informal trade.

Moreh is also a major transit point for weapons from Myanmar and pick-up trucks loaded high with Chinese goods including blankets are stopped by Indian Army units at multiple checkpoints all along the road to check for weapons being smuggled in. It has to be noted that these goods are also being smuggled in illegally without taxes being paid but the Army turns a blind eye to this customs evasion being preoccupied with more serious security-related matters. It is also observed that trucks and buses also breakdown often along the National Highway-39 (NH-39) to Moreh owing to the poor state of the road³². And this is the condition of most roads in this region including the famed Stilwell Road. This in turn provides an indication of the seriousness or lack thereof of the central government's oft-stated intention to open up the Northeast to greater trade and commerce with Southeast Asia. Add to this, NH-39 is in an area beset by multiple insurgent groups and as indicated earlier these groups levy taxes often between the various Army check-posts and this adds to the cost of doing business in this area as well as disincentivizes any initiative to improve trading operations.

The heavy traffic of people and goods to and from Moreh gives an indication of the money being made on this illegal trade in blankets among other things³³, and of the potential from the formalization of this trade and conditions – both security and commercial – improved. New Delhi however, cannot seem to be able to decide between what comes first – an improvement of the security situation or the improvement of economic and trading conditions that will create efforts to counter the insurgency³⁴. While there is increasingly movement towards

31 Observations from author's trip across the India-Myanmar border at Moreh in Manipur into Tamu in the Sagaing Division of Myanmar, December 2008.

32 Observations from author's trip to Moreh, Manipur, December 2008.

33 More about illegal trade between India and Myanmar see (Government of India: 2010).

34 Even in Mizoram province – among the few Northeast Indian provinces that no longer has an insurgency problem – the Zokhawthar trading post in Champhai district on the border with Myanmar's Chin State is witness to massive illegal trade. Apparently only about 30 percent of the border trade is actually legal in nature. See (Levesque & Rahman: 2008).

the latter strategy, skeptics argue that the security situation is so far gone that any premature opening up could actually end up playing into the hands of the insurgents providing them with fresh opportunities for loot and extortion and adding to the security dilemmas (Routray: 2009).

5. 'BIRD FLU' – DISEASE AND OTHER TRANSNATIONAL CHALLENGES

Officially demarcated borders have not and cannot keep out transnational threats such as gun-running, the narcotics trade, fake currency rackets and money laundering or disease spread which require common efforts and joint action by governments across borders in order to be dealt with. 'Bird Flu' thus represents these threats involving both state and non-state actors.

While the insurgency situation in Northeast India and its transnational linkages have already been described in some detail, there are other forms of negative consequences that are of a transnational nature. The limited physical infrastructure and connectivity in the region, has not prevented the problems from coming in whether in the form of disease or forced migrations owing to disturbed political conditions in Myanmar. For example, following the outbreak of bird flu in 2007, it was Northeast India that was at the forefront of the threat from the disease (Badarinath: 2007). Further, drug addiction is rampant in these border provinces with Myanmar being a major source of supply. Aligned to this problem is the spread of AIDS; Myanmarese refugees in Mizoram for example, have been accused of bringing AIDS into Mizo society (Levesque & Rahman: 2008).

In addition, in Mizoram especially, which saw a large influx of Myanmarese refugees and political dissidents following the 1988 takeover by the military junta in Myanmar, and which continues to receive many more refugees each year, there are frequent complaints of the newcomers taking away jobs from locals by being willing to work for lower wages. In addition, there is the problem of itinerant labour that moves freely across the border. While many Myanmarese who come across are of Chin ethnicity and related to the Mizos, they are also discriminated against and accused of being less devout Christians than the Mizos themselves and of leading less than exemplary lives³⁵.

In addition, given political conditions in Myanmar, popular dissatisfaction over

35 Meanwhile, members of the Reang ethnic group from Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh are treated even worse and their presence is a bigger political issue in Mizoram because they are not Christians. Thus, Chins from Myanmar fare comparatively better their counterparts from Bangladesh on account of the religious factor. See (Levesque and Rahman: 2008).

coercion and intimidation over the elections that the junta is holding in late 2010 and the fact that the various ethnic armies are far from pacified by the Myanmar military, there could be additional challenges for India of refugee movements.

There are other concerns frequently cited in Northeast India when talking about India's opening up to Southeast Asia under the aegis of the country's Look East Policy (LEP). The LEP has only in recent years come around to the view of needing to focus on Northeast India as an essential bridgehead to the ASEAN nations³⁶ and it is now widely accepted that economic development of the region can be accelerated by such contacts and that these might even have a role in ameliorating economic conditions such as unemployment and lack of opportunities that cause youths to take up arms in insurgent groups as a way of making a living. However, in many parts of the Northeast itself, this assessment by New Delhi is often considered fanciful and as ignoring other key issues. Quite apart from political grievances, there are also concerns that the Northeast could be used as a thoroughfare between mainland India and Southeast Asia. As one respondent put it, "we do not want to be a Thailand," referring to that country's reputation for prostitution and other tourism-related ills. Further, there are doubts about the actual benefits to the region of infrastructural development which include proposed plans for trans-Asian road and railway networks passing through Northeast India. The fear is that what might result is not a regional economy well-integrated into the rest of the Indian economy as well as Southeast Asian economies but an enclave economy that performs limited services and gains little from the being the linkage between India and Southeast Asia³⁷.

6. THE INDIA-MYANMAR BORDERLAND AS A MICRO-REGION

The region comprising today's Northeast India, Bangladesh and Myanmar and extending northwards up to Yunnan in China and eastwards into Southeast Asia was once a thriving economic area with prosperous economic communities and centres including major port cities³⁸. Today however, following the Partition of India and the slow descent into poverty and instability of Myanmar, that history is practically forgotten. Unlike, other parts of the world, this is an area where physical infrastructure and connectivity has actually deteriorated over the decades since the end of World War II. Against such a background, what are the prospects for region-building here?

For one, there is an identity that Northeast India enjoys as a region, which can be

36 For more on this aspect see (Ramesh & Baruah: 2004).

37 Interviews with Naga civil society representatives, December 2008.

38 See (Verghese: 1997). See also (Das:2005).

extend to include both Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia. Historical, cultural and ethnic connections have remained strong in these parts³⁹ even if inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic feuds are common and more often than not violent. Also, especially where Northeast India is concerned, a different kind of identity formation has been taking place in the years since Indian Independence. Given the fact that people from this region suffer from many common problems including high-handedness from New Delhi and its frequent lack of adherence to federal principles, provincial governments in the region have a tendency to identify with each other. Further there are a number of institutional arrangements that bring these governments together such as the North Eastern Council and there is also a specific ministry in the central government that addresses issue related to the Northeast namely, the Ministry for the Development of North-eastern Region (DoNER). While these bodies are often toothless or rank pretty low in the institutional hierarchy, they nevertheless reinforce a sense of common identity or at the very least of common grievance.

Further, people from Northeast India are generally bracketed as all belonging to a single 'Mongoloid' ethnicity and in other parts of India, often referred to by pejorative terms and epithets. As a result, Northeast Indian students in Delhi and elsewhere often have associations or groupings that bring various ethnic groups on a single platform, even if there are occasional tensions and conflicts of interests reflective of what is going on, on the ground back home⁴⁰. Again this larger Northeast Indian identity comprises various ethnic identities that overlap across the India-Myanmar frontier. Some of these have already been referred to in the previous sections such as the Nagas and the Mizos. But there are other ways in which these identities are reinforced despite the presence of the international boundary.

With movement of local groups across the India-Myanmar border largely free and quite regular and in many instances even allowed by bilateral agreement between the two countries under certain conditions, contacts have remained vibrant and alive. Given the comparatively better economic development and

39 In this context, Baruah argues that "the marginalisation of ethnic communities within nation states" can be compensated if these communities receive "transnational recognition." This is possible for instance, in the form of regional organizations that cut across international frontiers for functional purposes. See (Baruah: 2004).

40 One such factor is the bad blood created between Nagas and Meiteis by Naga claims over parts of present day Manipur territory under Nagalim project. This claim is based on the fact that the Manipur hills bordering Myanmar are largely Naga-dominated. Indeed, a key Naga insurgent leader Thuingaleng Muivah of the NSCN (I-M) faction is a Tangkhul Naga from Ukhrul district in north Manipur. In May 2010, there was violence and protests on both sides of the ethnic divide over Muivah's plans to visit his native village and the Manipur provincial government's subsequent refusal to grant permission for the visit.

opportunities on the Indian side of the border, there is substantial movement from Myanmar into India especially among ethnic groups such as the Nagas that straddle both sides of the border⁴¹. For example, Naga parents on the Myanmar side send their children to the Indian side for their schooling with these children staying at the home of their relatives. Similarly, Naga missionaries are active on the Myanmar side as are other ethnic Christian missionaries. Interestingly also, the Naga Hoho – the council of elders of the various Naga sub-tribes – is actively engaged in reconciliation efforts between the several Naga insurgent groups. This involves representatives of the Hoho crossing the international boundary, without informing the Indian government and without official documentation⁴². There are also other instances and kinds of identity linkages over a much larger geographical area. For instance, the Dai/Tai/Thai ethnic group spread across Assam, Thailand, Myanmar and Yunnan is renewing its cultural connections and holding conferences with scholars from each of these countries in different locations including India⁴³.

That these connections and common identity can be extended across international frontiers is evident in the support that the idea of opening up to Southeast Asia and China has got from provincial governments. For instance, while sections in the central government – particularly, the security agencies – remain reluctant to engage with China through regional forums such as the Kunming Initiative, the provincial governments are extremely keen on the idea and have made several representations to this effect. The rebuilding of the famed Stilwell Road embodies this desire. The road that runs through Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar before entering Yunnan province in China has been a major project of the Assam government⁴⁴.

Part of the reason for such extended identification across international boundaries by the provincial governments of the Northeast is because of their desire for a

41 In fact, the demand for an independent Nagalim or homeland for the Naga peoples besides including the whole province of Nagaland and parts of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh also includes parts of Sagaing Division of Myanmar.

42 Interview with Naga Hoho representative, Kohima, Nagaland, December 2008.

43 Interview with Tai Ahom representative, Sepon, Dibrugarh District, Assam, December 2008.

44 While the Assam section is completely tarred and ready, the reconstruction of the short Arunachal section has been much slower due to reasons of government inefficiency as well as the presence of insurgent groups operating in this area. As the Road nears the border with Myanmar, its condition progressively worsens and in Myanmar it is nothing more than a dirt track except where the Chinese have rebuilt vast stretches of it beginning from their side also in anticipation of eventually linking up with the Indian side. There is some speculation that the Myanmar government has deliberately kept the Road from being developed for security considerations of its own.

greater degree of autonomy from central government control that is all the greater given the security situation. As a result provincial governments and interest groups are at the forefront of the demand for renewal of cross-border ties – economic, cultural, religious, and political.

7. REGION-BUILDING – PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

The story so far should suggest that borders in India's northeast are viewed not so much as constraints but as resources⁴⁵ – in both negative and positive ways. Unfortunately, many sections do take advantage of opportunities for perpetuating violence and conflict and for corruption and illicit trade. Not enough however, is done for the purposes of generating positive externalities. There are several areas of transnational cooperation that are possible in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands that can solidify linkages and contribute to larger region-building efforts. Legalizing informal trade and creating suitable common institutions and regulations including the use of both currencies as legal tender in border areas would be an important step forward. From the Indian side, there is a need to do away with arcane and out-of-date regulations that stymie border trade and to develop better customs stations that facilitate rather than hinder trade. More importantly, New Delhi will have to defer to provincial interests in order to make these efforts truly worthwhile and sustainable.

On a larger regional level, the common problems that not just India and Myanmar but China and the countries of Southeast Asia face in the form of the narcotics and arms trade call for joint action and the reinvigoration of regional organizations such as BCIM and BIMSTEC to deal with these challenges. The countries involved could also move towards common legal regimes that govern conviction and extradition of each other's citizens. There is also a need for the regulation of labour and migrant flows along the India-Myanmar border but also along the India-Bangladesh, China-Myanmar, Myanmar-Thailand, Bangladesh-Myanmar and India-Bhutan borders.

With increasing globalization and with the economic opening up and reform of several Indochinese countries on the one side and India and China on the other and with the older ASEAN nations remaining pivotal economic players, the building of physical infrastructure already in motion under the aegis of the UNESCAP and Asian Development Bank (ADB) will only pick up speed and will require its own set of regulations and legislation, which too could contribute to a region-building effort or the strengthening of existing regional institutions. In this context,

⁴⁵ Daniel Bach makes a similar case with respect to borders in Africa. See (Bach: 2003).

corporations in furthering region-building too is important. While India has solicited investments from ASEAN nations and others in the Northeast on the basis of its geographical linkages with Southeast Asia, enterprises from these countries prefer to invest elsewhere in India because of better infrastructure and connectivity as well as security conditions.

Early-warning and management systems for disease and natural disasters are another possible avenue for regional cooperation. Myanmar's poor response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the limited abilities of the central government in New Delhi to react appropriately to the outbreak of bird flu in Manipur or to the rodent-caused mautam famine in Mizoram and Manipur suggest that there need to be better capacities available within the sub-region to react to such situations.

All of the measures mentioned here could and should involve greater interactions and linkages between provincial governments and local entities across both sides of the border in order to provide them with greater incentives and also because central governments are in these instances seldom likely to have enough information to be able to correctly read the situation on the ground or to react with the necessary speed and initiative.

The problems of region-building are of course numerous and the usual ones can be cited. The security situation brought about by ethnic insurgencies in India and Myanmar and Sino-Indian tensions over their unresolved boundary, is the primary obstacle to greater regional integration with central governments seeking to maintain a close watch on goings on in their border regions and unwilling to part with authority or initiative to provincial and local governments. Also, given the differing political and legal regimes, there are likely to be added problems when it comes to drawing up the requisite legal and regulatory frameworks for expanding trade and economic cooperation, and for facilitating travel and labour movement.

The situation in Myanmar under an authoritarian and paranoid military regime intent on preserving its rule throws a major spanner in the works. Even if China and India wanted to cooperate overcoming or leaving aside their boundary dispute, Myanmar would still be an impediment in political and economic terms. The weakness of the Myanmar economy would mean that centrifugal tendencies in the Myanmar economy could accelerate and parts of the Myanmar economy would be more closely integrated to either the Chinese or Indian economies.

Meanwhile, in India, there is certainly a 'democracy deficit' when it comes to New Delhi's dealings with the governments and peoples of Northeast India. Central government policies including the LEP need to be implemented with greater consultation with the relevant actors in the region. This more than anything else

would undercut the several insurgent movements in the region. The problem of a low population relative to the rest of India means that the Northeast Indian provinces have limited representation or influence at the national level to allow for their views to be heard or acted upon. While in China, Yunnan is also similarly fairly low down the provincial pecking order, it nevertheless enjoys a greater degree of freedom when it comes to economic policies including in terms of interactions with foreign governments for economic purposes as evident in its membership of the GMS, for example. India has a long way to go in this regard with respect to its Northeastern provinces.

8. CONCLUSION

In this case study of the micro-region comprising the India-Myanmar border regions, there are a number of negative linkages in evidence that explain why regionalism might have had limited success. These include primarily security considerations generated by the endemic violence in the region and manifest in the form of cross-border insurgencies. The Sino-Indian boundary dispute and their strategic competition in the region including the contest for influence in Myanmar, further complicate matters.

Such trade as it takes place officially is severely limited by out-of-date government regulations and the limited numbers of goods that are traded. Given the lack of adequate economic integration of the Northeastern Indian provinces with the rest of India, it is not surprising that the former try to make up for the shortfall through illegal trade usually involving Chinese goods coming in through Myanmar. The porous nature of the India-Myanmar border in addition to helping insurgency and informal trade, also allows for the flow of illegal weapons and narcotics and of political and economic refugees from Myanmar into India.

However, such negative linkages as illegal trade and disease spread also provide a case for greater regional cooperative efforts not fewer. Regional agreements are necessary to both regulate illegal trade as well as to encourage the formalization of mutually beneficial informal trade arrangements. Region-level cooperation is also necessary to regulate the flow of labour, to address trans-border environmental concerns such as over illegal logging and trafficking in endangered species, and to provide early-warning or emergency response in the case of natural disasters or the outbreak of disease.

India's contribution to Asian regionalism has hitherto remained limited. While it has tried to initiate several regional groupings since the end of the Cold War and after its own economic growth picked up steam, New Delhi has largely

remained unsuccessful in creating any effective organizations. In fact, the larger region comprising Northeast India, Myanmar and Yunnan in China might be described as showcasing an example of the limited success, even failure of state-driven regionalism. This case study therefore, also argues that in order for region-building efforts to succeed, the impetus must be towards involving sub-national governments to a far greater degree than has so far been the case, at least in India. It is these governments with their knowledge of local conditions and with greater stakes in the success of regional initiatives that need to be at the forefront of the effort towards building effective regional organizations that can promote both economic development as well as peace and stability in the India-Myanmar border regions and further afield.

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