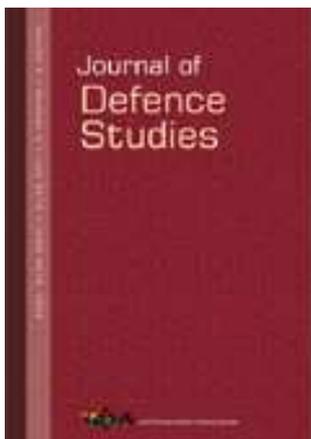


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Insurgency in North-East India

External Dynamics

*Sushil Kumar Sharma**

State and non-state elements in India's neighbourhood have been supporting insurgency in the North-East to weaken the Indian state. In the 1960s and 1970s, insurgents from the region, particularly the Naga rebels, had received moral and material support from China. Moreover, elements in Pakistan and Bangladesh too have been aiding North-East Indian insurgents from time to time. The sanctuaries in Bhutan and Myanmar have emerged out of the inability of their governments to adequately administer the border areas or deal effectively with the hostile activities of the Indian insurgents inside their respective territories. This article examines the role played by various external powers in sustaining insurgency in the North-East, the changing external dynamics, and provides a road map for future.

INTRODUCTION

To be successful, insurgent movements have a variety of requirements, most of which can be grouped in two categories—human and material. Human requirements include the ability to mobilize local and international support; capable leadership, including effective command and control; intelligence concerning the adversary; inspiration; and organizational aid. Whereas material requirements are in the form of safe haven and transit; financial resources; direct military support; and arms and material, including ammunition, food and fuel.¹

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Safe havens, whether inside the country where the insurgents operate or across international borders, are essential to the success of any guerrilla movement. Sanctuaries protect the group's leadership and members; provide a place where insurgents can rest, recuperate and plan future operations; serve as a staging area from which to mount attacks; and, in some cases, function as an additional base for recruitment, training, dissemination of propaganda and contact with the outside world. Such sanctuaries allow insurgents and their commanders to organize, train, recruit, plan, recuperate and otherwise conduct essential operations outside the reach of the targeted state. Without a safe haven, insurgents are constantly vulnerable to the government forces. In North-East India, cross-border sanctuaries appear to have been a major contributor to insurgent effectiveness to sustain insurgency. The right to transit relates to the possession of a safe haven. When rebels can transit neighbouring states (either through the connivance of an allied government or because of its weakness), it becomes far harder for their adversaries to defeat them.²

Transnational linkages have remained a crucial force multiplier for the insurgents in north-east India. While the Naga insurgents received patronage from the Chinese in the 1960s and 1970s, safe bases in countries, including Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, have been used by the outfits to sustain themselves. The Golden Triangle (comprising Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) has provided an economic boom for the insurgent groups to sustain themselves. Easy availability of small arms in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar has been another factor behind the sustenance of insurgency in the region. Arms have entered India's North-East from the South-East Asian markets through the region's porous borders with these countries. Interlinkages between the outfits have ensured the smooth transfer of military hardware and the technology to use them. As a result, even the weakest of the outfits has access to sophisticated arms and explosives. Unlike other parts of the country, the North-East holds an important position from a strategic point of view as these states share their borders with other countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. The terrain, the state of socio-economic development and historical factors, such as language/ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources and a widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation, have resulted in a fragile security situation in the north-eastern states. This has resulted in violence and diverse demands by various Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs).

Many ethnic groups in the region, especially in the areas bordering the international boundaries, have more in common with the population living across the boundary than with their own nationals. The affinity of groups with their kin groups across the border, and the sense of support (both material and non-material) they derive from them, has had serious implications. The social continuities that stretch across the territorial frontiers have led to demands by the politically fragmented groups to redraw international boundaries, and also to reorganize states within the Indian Union.

EXTERNAL LINKAGES OF INSURGENTS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

North-East India has been facing insurgency since 1956 due to feelings of ethnic separatism among its inhabitants. Ninety-eight per cent of the North-East is contiguous with the international border, which allows terror outfits to get sanctuaries in Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and even China and Nepal.³ In these countries, they get facilities for training and can also procure arms and ammunition. Involvement of intelligence agencies and the regular flow of funds from the smugglers of narcotics from the Golden Triangle⁴ are a cause of concern.

The insurgent groups started developing their international linkages immediately after the independence in 1947. The Nagas were the first to raise the banner of insurgency. The process started when the father of Naga insurgency, Angami Zapu Phizo, chief of the rebel Naga National Council (NNC) left the Naga Hills in 1956 to fight for an independent Naga homeland from London. He continued his activity from there till his death in 1990.⁵ East Pakistan (and later Bangladesh) and China, with Myanmar, provided the corridor for various IIGs, especially in their efforts to seek aid from the People's Republic of China. Naga insurgents were the first to reach China when, 'some time in January 1967, "Brig" Thinoselie and Muivah with their tired men reached Yunnan' after a 97-day trek through the inhospitable Myanmar terrain. Later, the footsteps of the Naga insurgents were to be retraced by United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) 'chief of staff', Paresh Baruah, and his 'staff officer', Lohit Deury.⁶ The ULFA set up its first camp in the Moulvi Bazaar district in Bangladesh in 1985. By 1990, the outfit had also established its Pakistani contacts. Its top leaders, including Paresh Baruah, travelled to Afghanistan through Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, where Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) assisted them in meeting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a top Afghan mujahideen leader of the time. By

the end of 1990 and early 1991, the ULFA also set up well-entrenched bases inside southern Bhutan.⁷ Insurgent groups also established business interests in arms smuggling, drug trafficking and investment in various ventures, including running of hotels and owning boats. In fact, these ventures have been facilitating the continuation of their presence in the neighbouring countries.

Bhutan and Nepal became safe sanctuaries for other insurgent groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO). The terror groups also preferred Bhutan as it was easy for them to carry out operations across the border in India and return back to their safe hideouts in southern Bhutan. The insurgency in Manipur also received support from Bangladesh. Similarly, in Tripura, both the major outlawed rebel groups—the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)—fighting for independent tribal homelands, operated from bases in adjoining Bangladesh. Over a period of time, insurgent groups lost their ideology, mass support and got disillusioned with their leadership, resulting in large defections and surrenders. However, some insurgent groups are still maintaining their sanctuaries in Myanmar, Bangladesh and close to Bhutan. For lasting peace in North-East India, the external support to insurgents needs to be checked.

NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES AND CHANGING DYNAMICS

China

China's motivation to support the Naga insurgency converged with Pakistan. Both had antagonistic relations with India. The mid-1960s was the period when ideological war between the Communists and the Western democracies was at its peak. China viewed India as its rival in Asia and was giving full support to Naxalites⁸ in India. The tribes of the North-East were ideal targets for fanning insurgencies and keeping Indian troops tied down. Phizo had become disenchanted with the West and had begun to despair about their lack of support. He was desperately seeking to internationalize the Naga problem with the help of a powerful foreign ally. China was the obvious choice. The Chinese support to Naga rebels started towards the end of 1966.⁹ Large numbers of Naga, Mizo and Meitei rebels, including their leaders, visited China and established training camps between 1966 and 1975. They came back equipped with weapons and ammunitions. China apparently curtailed support

for Indian insurgents in the late 1980s, following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China.¹⁰

During the course of the Bhutanese military operation, 'Operation All Clear', it became clear to insurgent leaders that they would have to vacate the Bhutanese territory. This prompted the ULFA 'chairman', Arabinda Rajkhowa, to appeal to the Chinese leadership on 25 December 2003 to provide safe passage to the insurgents from Bhutan for temporary shelter in China. In his fax communication to the Chinese leadership, Rajkhowa said, 'We have come under massive attack of Indo-Bhutan joint forces and our combatants have been forced to retreat up to the Sino-Bhutan border due to all out air and artillery campaigns.'¹¹ Beijing, however, turned down the ULFA request and asked its frontier forces to remain vigilant against any effort by the insurgents to move into their territory. This was a positive change of approach of Chinese towards Indian rebels. At present, there is no official report of North-Eastern insurgent outfits having bases on Chinese soil. However, sources indicate that Paresh Baruah is still hiding in Yunnan province of China.

Recent reports, however, also indicate that insurgents from the North-East are, once again, trying to take the help of China as the political environment in Bangladesh has become unfavourable to them with the return of Sheikh Hasina to power since October 2009. ULFA's commander-in-chief, Paresh Baruah, is believed to be somewhere close to the Myanmar–China border, scouting for help to relocate its bases.¹² There are reports that Paresh Baruah met Chinese officials in December 2013 and had sought permission to establish ULFA (Independent) camps in China and Myanmar. Intelligence inputs indicate that Paresh Baruah has reportedly established certain contacts in Chinese towns of Manxi, Ruili, to name a few. The outfit has reportedly set up a base at Laiza, a stronghold of Kachin Independence Army (KIA) inside Myanmar at Sino-Myanmar border

The arrests of Wang Qing, a Chinese spy disguised as a television (TV) reporter, at the headquarters of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) on 25 January 2011 and Anthony Shimray, a key official and major arms procurer of the NSCN-IM from Patna on 2 October 2010, confirm the Chinese involvement in supply of weapons to NSCN-IM.¹³ According to an input, Paresh Baruah procured arms from a Chinese arms manufacturing company, NORINCO, through Chinese arms mafias. An umbrella organization, North East Revolutionary Front (NERF), a conglomerate of Myanmar-based North-

East militant groups, where S.S. Khaplang is the head and Paresh Baruah is the second-in-command, has reportedly been formed under tutelage of the Chinese intelligence agency.¹⁴

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been a safe haven for insurgents in the North-East since East Pakistan days. Indian insurgents have received support under all regimes in Bangladesh. As a result, almost all North-Eastern groups engaged in insurgency in the North-East have established their camps in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also been supporting insurgency in the North-East by freely allowing smuggling of arms to take place from its territory. Under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led governments, this support has been direct. Begum Khaleda Zia, in her last stint as leader of the opposition, had hailed these insurgents as 'brave freedom fighters' carrying out a 'heroic battle against an oppressive regime'.¹⁵ The removal of the term 'secularism' from its Constitution (1977) and the adoption of Islam as the state religion (1988) has provided a stimulus to religious extremism; strengthened Pakistan–Bangladesh ties; and increased cooperation between the two countries, in particular the ISI and the Directorate General of Foreign Intelligence (DGFI) in Bangladesh. Bangladesh refuses to acknowledge the acute problem of illegal migration of its people into India.¹⁶

The Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh took a significant step towards improving bilateral relations with India when it arrested two top leaders of the ULFA—'foreign secretary', Sashadhar Choudhury, and 'finance secretary', Chitraban Hazarika—on 1 November 2009.¹⁷ Later, Bangladesh handed over Ranjan Daimary, the president of the outlawed NDFB. Since 1 May 2010, Bangladesh has launched a number of proactive operations against Indian terrorists on their soil. As a result, Bangladesh is not a favoured destination for terrorists any more. The award of death sentence to Paresh Baruah and 13 Bangladeshi nationals, including a former Jamaat chief, former DGFI and prominent government functionaries, and recovery of a huge cache of arms and ammunition by Bangladesh Security Forces along the Assam–Tripura border are the significant steps. However, some camps providing logistics support and safe havens are still functional. Work on the fencing is continuing but borders with Meghalaya and Assam (in the area of Dhubri along the Brahmaputra River) continue to be porous.

Fencing the border with Bangladesh has progressed at a slow pace.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the 854 km fence built in Phase-I has already been damaged along most of the stretches and, consequently, has ceased to be effective in controlling illegal cross-border activities. A crucial length of around 300 km along the eastern border in West Bengal still remains to be fenced. The river border, mostly in Dhubri district in Assam and southern West Bengal, presents peculiar problems, as it is difficult to locate permanent border outposts in the area due to swelling of the Brahmaputra and other rivers that go deeper by about 30 feet. River line borders tend to change course periodically, leading to a host of disputes associated with the difficulties in establishing ownership of the newly created territories. As a result, protecting and constructing border fencing in such places becomes difficult, and if the fencing is even constructed, its existence remains unsure.¹⁸ There are reports of camps of the North-East insurgents in Bangladesh. Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has handed over a list of 66 'camps of north-east insurgents' to the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), seeking actions against them.¹⁹

Pakistan

It was almost a strategic compulsion for Pakistan to tie down maximum Indian troops in the North-East. When the Nagas rebelled against India, Pakistan found an ideal opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Naga rebels were the first to receive moral and material support from Pakistan, which had opened an office of assistant high commissioner in Shillong soon after independence. Naga rebels used the office to establish contact with Pakistani officials in Dacca (Dhaka). The groundwork for receiving moral and material support from East Pakistan was done during visits of Naga underground leaders. Pakistan had created a special liaison cell for contact and coordination with Naga and Mizo rebels.²⁰ Pakistan's intelligence agency, ISI, tried to spread its tentacles across the North-East through the IIGs. In 1990, ULFA established first contact with ISI through the Pakistan High Commission at Dhaka. Meeting with ISI was a turning point in the annals of the outfit. A phase of gradual transformation started from insurgent mode to terrorist mode, and ISI played a key role in the 1990s in providing logistic support, such as advance training on urban guerilla warfare, handling of sophisticated arms, and preparation of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).²¹

To facilitate its work, the ISI has tried to take the help of fundamentalist elements within the Bangladesh government, army, bureaucracy and intelligence. The ISI has been instrumental, either directly or through

the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka, to develop a nexus between IIGs, Islamic fundamentalists and criminal elements in Bangladesh. Besides assisting terrorists in the procurement of arms, ammunition and explosives, the ISI has been arranging meetings of terrorists of different hues to coordinate their activities.²² The ISI is alleged to have supported a network in Bangladesh, which included the hard-line Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), the BNP and the North-East rebel groups, during the BNP's rule²³

Myanmar

Myanmar has been another favourite base for Indian insurgents for three important reasons. The insurgents used this country as a safe base after East Pakistan (Bangladesh) became unavailable to them immediately after the liberation of Bangladesh. Myanmar is also used as a crucial link zone through which rebels can go to China for training and weapons. It also provides a safe training and regrouping zone where new recruits can be taught guerrilla warfare and active guerrilla units can be shifted to when under pressure in India. The drug trade further strengthens their activities, with Myanmar's insurgent groups (like the Kachins) cooperating with IIGs like ULFA and NSCN.²⁴ After the arrest of Bangladesh-based leadership of ULFA and NDFB, the Myanmar base of ULFA, which had already been set up in collusion with NSCN-K, got strengthened further; while NDFB also had to shift to Myanmar with the help of KYKL (a Meitei militant outfit).

The vulnerability of the India–Myanmar border stems from a number of factors. First, the international boundary between the two countries has not crystallized on the ground as lines separating two sovereign countries. The India–Myanmar boundary is also an artificial line which is superimposed on the socio-cultural landscape of the borderland. As a result, the boundary line cuts across houses and villages, thus dividing several tribes such as the Nagas, Kukis and Mizos, and forcing them to reside as citizens of different countries. These tribes, however, refuse to accept the artificial line and continue to maintain strong linkages with their kith and kin across the border. Second, the border traverses a region which is infested with numerous insurgencies. These insurgencies have hampered the nation-building process in this part of India. Third, the India–Myanmar border has a unique arrangement in place called the free movement regime (FMR). The FMR permits the tribes residing along the border to travel and trade within 16 km across the boundary without any visa restrictions. While

the FMR has helped the tribes continue to maintain their age-old ties, it has also become a cause of concern for the security establishment. The insurgents have been taking advantage of the FMR and have been crossing over to Myanmar to receive training in arms, establish safe havens and re-enter India to carry out subversive attacks. Fourth, policymakers in Delhi have not given adequate attention to the India–Myanmar border and, as a result, it continues to be poorly managed.²⁵ Almost all insurgent groups operating in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam have their camps in Myanmar.

Myanmar's stand towards the insurgents in the North-East is ambiguous. Their army has been selective in targeting Indian rebels. As a result, despite occasional crackdowns on NSCN-K, ULFA and People's Liberation Army (PLA), rebels have been functioning from there without any difficulties. The reluctance of the Myanmar government to act against IIGs can be explained in the light of the country's own severe internal security problems and the tenuous control the government exercises over the remote regions that border India. The ethnic affinity of populations on either side of the border, archaic rules and regulations governing the transborder movement of people and trade and poor border security aggravate the situation.²⁶ Indeed, despite the success of the high-level visits between India and Myanmar, Myanmar has not been able to act in the manner that New Delhi has expected it to, because many parts of northern and north-western Myanmar are not quite in the control of Naypyidaw. Also, there is some reason to believe that the lower echelons of the Myanmar's army have a tacit understanding with the IIGs.²⁷

Bhutan

The Bhutan–India border is 699 km long and adjoins the Indian states of Assam (267 km), Arunachal Pradesh (217 km), West Bengal (183 km) and Sikkim (32 km).²⁸ The presence of Indian insurgents and terrorists in Bhutanese territory forced Bhutan to take military action against IIGs under the code name 'Operation All Clear', on 15 December 2003, to oust them from its territory. Whatever may be the reason behind the Bhutanese military action, 'Operation All Clear' was a landmark event and set an example of cooperation in counter-terrorism in South Asia. There has been substantial increase in vigil and intelligence sharing along Indo-Bhutanese border after this operation. Bhutan has assured the Government of India (GoI) of all sorts of cooperation in countering the menace of terrorism. There are no permanent insurgent camps in

Bhutan at present. However, inaccessible forested areas along the Assam–Bhutan border continue to serve as temporary bases and safe havens for the insurgent groups, mainly NDFB (Songbijit), who seek refuge there to avoid contact with the security forces.

Nepal

The recent arrests of two high-profile terrorists, Adul Karim Tunda and Mohammed Ahmed Sidibappa alias Yasin Bhatkal, have brought the India–Nepal border into sharp focus. The seeds for an ‘open’ border between India and Nepal can be found in the Treaty of Peace and Friendship which the two countries signed in 1950. The extent of misuse of the open border by terrorists and criminals has led to a clamour in some quarters to rethink the rationale for keeping the border with Nepal open. While it is true that the open border has facilitated terrorist and criminal activities which are adversely impacting national security, it is equally important to recognize that an open border has also helped India and Nepal to develop and deepen socio-cultural and economic relations. The open border also has a favourable impact on the two economies.²⁹

The territory of Nepal is used as a safe entry point for intelligence operations by the ISI. Nepal has also, in recent years, come to be recognized as an important factor in the terrorists’ plans. This is due to the fact that Nepal basically serves as a good contact point for the purchase of sophisticated armoury by various insurgents groups based in North-East India. The insurgents do not face much hurdles sneaking into Nepal.³⁰ The emergence of Nepal as a new safe haven for the insurgents further complicates the matter in terms of India’s security concerns. The continued interference of the ISI and its subversive activities in encouraging secessionism, coupled with rise of Islamic fundamentalism, are a serious threat to the entire country’s socio-political stability. There are reports of KLO leaders visiting Chinese and Pakistanis embassies in Nepal. The Indian government cannot afford to ignore the rising threat that Pakistan poses in its sensitive border areas.

THE WAY AHEAD: BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL MEASURES

Effective Border Management

Myanmar

There is an urgent need to effectively manage the border with Myanmar. Two separate forces for border guarding (BSF) and counter-insurgency

operations (Assam Rifles), being planned by the MHA, are likely to cause operational ambiguity. Considering the complex nature of the terrain, Assam Rifles is the best force suited to undertake both operations.³¹ There is also need to initiate a revision of the FMR and reduce the permitted distance of unrestricted travel. The construction of the joint check posts, along with other infrastructure, should be expedited. India should endeavour to meaningfully engage with Myanmar and solicit its cooperation in resolving all outstanding issues so as to better manage the mutual border.³² The change of governance and strengthening of democracy in the country have added a tint to the growing relations.

Nepal

Transforming the Indo-Nepal border from an 'open border' to a 'closed border' would severely damage the ties, with disastrous consequences for the citizens and economies of both the countries. It would therefore be prudent to keep the border open with Nepal, but manage it more effectively by strengthening security through effective law enforcement, installing screening and detection devices at the checkpoints and enhancing intelligence networks. India and Nepal have to collaborate and coordinate their efforts to improve the situation along their border by setting up joint task forces to investigate cross-border crimes as well as share real-time intelligence, conduct coordinated or joint patrolling, reinstal missing border pillars and repair the damaged ones and jointly develop infrastructure along the border.³³ The recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the revival of the relationship have added a new dimension to the partnership between the two nations. This will go a long way not only in eradicating the IIGs bases but also in bringing prosperity by means of trade.

Bangladesh

That consultation and cooperation between neighbours can pave the way for resolving contentious issues, especially those relating to management of their shared borders, is amply demonstrated by the outcome of various bilateral interactions that have taken place between India and Bangladesh in recent months. From India's point of view, one issue that has been rankling for years but is now gradually moving towards resolution is the construction of fences close to the zero line. The existence of water bodies and other hurdles such as houses, villages and temples necessitate that India construct the border fences close to the zero line at a number

of places. Nevertheless, endeavours should be consistently made by India and Bangladesh to engage in dialogue and deliberations to iron out problems that sour bilateral relations.³⁴ The deliberate attempts to settle the border disputes of the enclaves will lead the two countries to an era of peace and sustenance.

Bhutan

Akin to the border with Nepal, the border with Bhutan also remains open and porous. To improve the security environment along this border, the *Sashastra Seema Bal* (SSB), responsible for guarding the border, should expedite occupation of sanctioned border outposts (BOPs). A bilateral mechanism in the shape of an India–Bhutan Group on Border Management and Security has proved to be very useful in assessing threat perception in reference to the two countries from groups attempting to take advantage of this open border and in discussing ways of improving the security environment in border areas. This organization needs to be strengthened.³⁵ The recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bhutan has reaffirmed both countries' commitment towards mutual development, cooperation, strengthening of economic ties and mutual security concerns.

Smart Borders

The Indian approach to border management has been largely security-centric. However, India can adopt the principle of 'smart borders' being employed by the United States (US), which lays emphasis on quick and easy, legal flow of people and goods, while maintaining a steady momentum in the process of improvement of infrastructure and other facilities at checkpoints, and makes these border points more people friendly and trade efficient. There is a need to adopt the principle of cooperative border management. This would require greater diplomatic efforts to sensitize the neighbours regarding shared threats such as terrorism and cross-border crimes.³⁶ The US has used a three-pronged 'smart border' concept to include: (a) virtual border control—uses advantages of technological developments to enhance the ability to identify people, assess risks and share information before individuals reach and attempt to enter a country; (b) biometric data—new techniques are being employed to verify individuals' identity more effectively; biometric information, such as fingerprints and retinal scans, is relied on more routinely to complement traditional documents such as passports which

can be more easily obtained fraudulently or stolen; and (c) international cooperation—this is not just in terms of exchanging data on travellers and potential threats and maintaining virtual borders, but in managing physical borders.³⁷

The concept of ‘smart borders’ is very much viable in the Indian context. India has taken a step further towards achieving biometric database in the form of the ‘Aadhar Card’. Similar exercises may be facilitated in neighbouring countries to maintain citizen records. Though a distant probability at present, the process may be hastened if the technical expertise available with India can be shared with the neighbours to help them execute a similar project in their countries.

Strengthening of Regional Forums

Strengthening of regional forums like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), involving a group of countries in South and Southeast Asia, that is, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal as member countries, is important. Indeed, for India, these regional groupings act as a medium for achieving the three-pronged strategy of its ‘Look East Policy’: (a) closer links with its proximate and immediate neighbours; (b) economic integration with South-East Asia; and (c) security considerations of North-East India and development of its untapped potential.³⁸ Enhanced economic and security cooperation with South and South-East Asian countries will lead to a better understanding of benefits of peace in North-East India and emphasize the joint resolve to counter the menace of insurgency.

Diplomatic Initiatives

To ensure peace in the North-East, India will have to increase diplomatic pressure on countries that are providing safe havens to these insurgents and break their supply lines. Steps should also be taken to disrupt the business interests of some of these organizations in neighbouring countries so that the incentive for keeping insurgency alive is lost. The recent signing of a new extradition treaty and visa regime between India and Bangladesh marks a major shift in their relationship. While the new extradition, visa agreement and stronger economic ties are a clear marker of progress,³⁹ the following diplomatic initiatives are recommended to further strengthen India’s interests:

1. Use of 'smart border' concept being followed by the US, in which the emphasis has been on the safe and secure flow of people and goods, improvement of border infrastructure and cross-border cooperation.
2. Strengthening joint border mechanism for effective border guarding to check arms smuggling, especially from Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal.
3. Setting up of a joint task force with Bangladesh to deal with the menace of smuggling of fake Indian currency notes (FICN).
4. Diplomatic overdrive to positively and continuously engage more amenable neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
5. India and Bangladesh relations are, at present, going through a positive phase and both countries need to sustain this upswing and work closely to secure and effectively manage their shared border.
6. Setting up of bilateral institutional interactions on the lines of India–Bangladesh border to address and resolve various challenges along the borders.
7. Endeavour to resolve disputes with Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar, with a sense of accommodation, and be prepared to give more in return for their cooperation in anti-insurgency drive.
8. Construction of fences close to the zero line with Bangladesh; also, hasten the selective border fencing (along the entry points) with Myanmar and deployment of a homogeneous force for border guarding. Address the Indo-Nepal porous border on priority to choke easy flow of funds and materials across the same.
9. Enhance maritime cooperation with neighbouring navies operating in the area of Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal to arrest the increasing trend of arms smuggling through the sea route.
10. Cultivate Bangladesh as a strategic ally, thus weaning away institutional support to the operations by ISI in Bangladesh. Provide economic support to build the infrastructure and address illegal migration issue bilaterally.⁴⁰
11. Diplomatically, display sensitivity for Chinese aspirations regarding the presence of Tibetan refugees and their political activities in India.

12. Propose specific corridors for movement across the border between India and Myanmar, amending the erstwhile understanding of free passage for 16 km, thus arresting the increasing trend of narcotics smuggling and movement of insurgents freely across the porous border.
13. Engagement of all neighbours simultaneously across the diplomatic, political and economic levels. In addition, there should be an endeavour to increase the defence cooperation, thus enhancing trust between the neighbours.
14. Economic support to Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to build infrastructure in these countries so as to promote better understanding.
15. Increase cultural exchanges, tourism and people-to-people contact, including provision of job permits and work visas, for the South Asian countries.

Joint Training

The Chinese PLA and Indian Army have participated in three joint training exercises, 'Hand-in-Hand', for counter-terrorism training. This is an example of the joint resolve of the two nations to combat terrorism. The exercises have helped both the armies gain enormous experience in combating terrorism at international level, showing their tactical and combat skills and further refining their combat drills and procedures. We should encourage joint training with other neighbours to have better understanding of the capability and compatibility of each other to undertake joint operations. It is important for us to sustain a long-term relationship—one that is equal, one that respects each other's strategic autonomy, but also enables us to learn from each other to develop together, to deal with many of the issues that we face that affect the peace. Operation Sampriti—the joint Army Special Forces exercise between India and Bangladesh—could form the basis of cooperation between the two countries in secular Bangladesh's quest against terror.⁴¹ Similar exercises with Nepal in the recent months have enhanced the cooperation between the countries in sharing of real-time intelligence.

Joint Vigil of Borders

Borders with Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal are thinly held and porous, and are artificial lines which have been superimposed on the socio-cultural landscape of the borderland. As a result, the boundary line

cuts across houses and villages, thus dividing several tribes and forcing them to reside as citizens of different countries. These tribes, however, continue to maintain strong linkages with their kith and kin across the border. As mentioned earlier, the India–Myanmar border has in place the FMR which permits the tribes residing along the border to travel 16 km across the boundary without visa restrictions. This has become a cause of concern for the security establishment as insurgents cross over into Myanmar, receive training in arms, establish safe havens, and re-enter India to carry out subversive attacks.⁴² Hence, there is a need for continuous joint vigil by the security forces of both sides along the border. Movement of the security forces may clash with the FMR (16 km across the boundary) in case of Myanmar and 10 km across the border with Bhutan and Nepal, but it would definitely act as a deterrent to the insurgents operating close to the border.

Joint Operations

‘Operation All Clear’ by Bhutan was a landmark operation. Bhutan’s action demonstrates clearly that an individual country can address neighbours’ security concern within its territory.⁴³ If Bhutan’s efforts towards counterterrorism were followed as a precedent in South Asia, then a positive outcome would be the disruption of external linkages of various terrorist groups.⁴⁴ Thus, the neighbourhood is important to India’s internal security. Conversely, India’s security is central to peace in South Asia, given its geographical spread. There is a need for more joint counter-terrorism operations with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Respective security forces of South Asian countries could launch military operations within their sovereign boundaries and India may coordinate their efforts; or joint operations can be launched if mutually acceptable. Joint military actions against the insurgent groups that have based their camps 20–50 km inside Myanmar, along the Indian border, are necessary to bring about peace in the North-East. Joint operations are also required along Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal borders. We may consider having a South Asian Regional Counter Terrorism Force. A mechanism must be evolved whereby joint operations can be conducted in real-time scenarios, bypassing traditional channels that would have had to be activated in ordinary circumstances. The institution of such a mechanism would save precious time and lead to successful joint operations.

Uniform Simple Laws against Insurgents

There is a need to have simple uniform legislations to deal with insurgents. The signing of two landmark agreements between India and Myanmar on 24 October 2013, the first to extradite criminals and terrorists and liberalize the visa regime, and the second the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT)—a framework for ‘investigation, prosecution, prevention and suppression of crime, including those relating to terrorism’⁴⁵—is a positive step. Cooperation in combating terrorism can be facilitated if legal instruments such as mutual legal assistance and extradition treaties for transfer of convicted offenders exist and are strengthened. Aspects like choking funding, banning of undesirable organizations and heavy penalty/sanctions on organizations/institutions supporting terrorism need to be initiated. Signing of an MLAT with Bhutan and Bangladesh, on the above lines, will enhance the ability to pursue common objectives that would enable law enforcing agencies to cooperate and provide assistance on matters relating to investigation, prevention and suppression of crime, including insurgency.

CONCLUSION

Despite the overwhelming international consensus evolving against international terrorism, the forces inimical to India are yet to curb their covert and overt support to insurgent and terrorist groups operating against India in the North-East. Bangladesh government’s action against the IIGs and ‘Operation All Clear’ launched by Bhutan against insurgents in the North-East created a positive impact and prompted other neighbouring nations to tighten the noose on these groups; however, this has not made insurgent outfits completely defunct. The insurgent outfits have successfully managed to shift their bases to other places. To ensure peace in the North-East, in addition to the counter-insurgency operations, there is a need to increase diplomatic pressure on countries which are providing safe havens to these insurgents. Diplomatic initiatives to choke the funds and the supply lines of these terror outfits need to be initiated. Steps should also be taken to disrupt the business interests of some of these organizations in neighbouring countries so that the incentive for keeping insurgency alive is lost. Joint training and operations need to be encouraged. ‘Operation All Clear’ may provide the future model for military cooperation between South Asian neighbours in an era of war against terrorism. A concentrated effort needs to be

made by the GoI, incorporating the central agencies, state agencies, non-governmental organizations, local administration and civil population, to fight an all-out battle against the IIGs.

NOTES

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