

PROXY WAR AND INSURGENCY IN NORTHEAST INDIA: ANALYZING THE STRATEGIC AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the strategic dimensions of proxy wars in the Northeast India, focusing on foreign interventions, cross-border sanctuaries, and arms trafficking. It examines the role of neighbouring states such as China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan in fuelling insurgency, directly or indirectly, through logistical and ideological support. The situation regarding proxy warfare involving the Indo-Myanmar adjoining borders and the use of Zo-Kuki militants in the Indo-Myanmar border regions, particularly in Naga villages like Wanglee in Kamjong District, Manipur is both complex and tragic. Allegations have emerged that the Assam Rifles have collaborated with certain militant groups to further their strategic objectives, resulting in violence against innocent civilians. This proxy warfare approach has led to a cycle of retribution and conflict, exacerbating the already tense relations among different ethnic communities in the region. In areas such as Wanglee, civilians have faced dire consequences, including displacement, loss of life, and the destruction of property due to clashes instigated by these proxy operations. The involvement of Zo-Kuki militants, allegedly supported by state forces, has intensified fears within local populations, who find themselves caught between insurgent activities and military operations. The situation raises critical questions about the ethics of using proxy forces in counterinsurgency operations and the impact of such strategies on civilians. It underscores the urgent need for accountability and oversight to prevent further human rights violations while addressing the underlying issues of ethno-nationalism and separatist sentiments that fuel the ongoing insurgency. Overall, the reliance on proxy forces not only undermines trust in government institutions but also perpetuates a cycle of violence that severely affects the lives of innocent people in these vulnerable border regions.

Keywords: Proxy war, insurgency, northeast India, foreign influence, security, insurgency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Northeast India, comprising eight states, has been a hotspot of insurgency since India's independence. The region's unique socio-ethnic fabric, coupled with geopolitical proximity to international borders, has made it vulnerable to external influence. This paper investigates the phenomenon of proxy war, where foreign actors

exploit insurgencies to destabilize the region and hinder India's national security.

2. UNDERSTANDING PROXY WAR IN THE NORTHEAST

Proxy war involves indirect intervention by external entities, where non-state actors receive financial, military, and ideological support. In Northeast India, insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National

Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), and Manipur-based outfits have reportedly been linked to foreign sponsors. The involvement of neighbouring countries, particularly China, Pakistan, and Myanmar, in extending covert assistance has exacerbated the situation.¹

3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FOREIGN INFLUENCE

Since the 1950s, insurgencies in Northeast India have often found refuge in foreign territories. Some key developments include:

China's Alleged Support: During the 1960s and 1970s, China reportedly trained and armed Naga and Assamese insurgents.

Bangladesh's Role: Before 1971, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) provided logistical support to insurgents. Post-1971, Dhaka oscillated between supporting and cracking down on these elements.

Myanmar's Border Haven: Various insurgent factions have used Myanmar's remote regions for training and refuge.²

Pakistan's ISI Network: Intelligence reports have indicated Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) providing indirect support to anti-India insurgent groups.

The historical perspective of insurgency and conflict in Northeast India reveals a complex tapestry of ethnic diversity, colonial legacies, and post-independence struggles for autonomy and identity. The roots of modern insurgencies can be traced back to the British colonial era, which exacerbated ethnic divisions through administrative policies that favoured certain groups over others. Following India's independence in 1947, many communities in the Northeast felt marginalized and neglected by the central government, leading to the emergence of various separatist movements that sought greater political autonomy or outright independence.³

Foreign influence in this region has significantly shaped these conflicts, with neighbouring countries like China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh

playing pivotal roles. Insurgent groups have historically sought refuge, resources, and training across national borders, often receiving support from foreign entities that view these conflicts through a geopolitical lens. For example, the porous Indo-Myanmar border has allowed for the flow of arms and resources to insurgent groups, while also making it challenging for Indian authorities to maintain stability. Additionally, foreign powers may exploit local grievances to further their strategic interests, contributing to the perpetuation of violence and instability.⁴

Overall, the interplay of historical grievances and foreign interventions has created a volatile environment in Northeast India, complicating efforts to achieve lasting peace and security in the region. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is crucial for formulating effective policies aimed at addressing both local aspirations and broader geopolitical considerations.

4. STRATEGIC AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

The impact of foreign-backed insurgency in Northeast India includes:

- a. **Threat to National Security:** Armed rebellions disrupt internal security and economic development.
- b. **Cross-Border Arms and Drug Trafficking:** Illicit networks flourish in insurgency-affected areas, further fuelling instability.
- c. **Ethnic Conflicts and Displacement:** The insurgency has led to inter-ethnic violence and large-scale displacement of civilians.
- d. **Economic Underdevelopment:** Persistent conflicts deter investments and infrastructure development.

5. INDIA'S COUNTER-INSURGENCY AND DIPLOMATIC RESPONSES

India's counter-insurgency and diplomatic responses to the challenges posed by insurgency in Northeast India are multifaceted and have evolved over time. The government's

approach encompasses military operations, development initiatives, and diplomatic engagement with local stakeholders and neighbouring countries.⁵

Counter-Insurgency Operations

The Indian government has employed a range of military strategies to combat insurgent groups. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has been a key element of this strategy, granting security forces significant powers to conduct operations in "disturbed" areas. This has included cordon-and-search operations, extensive surveillance, and active engagement in conflict zones. While these operations aim to neutralize armed insurgents, they have also drawn criticism for human rights violations, leading to public unrest and distrust among affected communities.⁶

Development Initiatives

Recognizing that military responses alone are insufficient; the Indian government has increasingly emphasized development as a counter-insurgency measure. Initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities have been implemented to address the root causes of discontent. Programs such as the Special Development Package for the Northeast are designed to foster economic growth and social cohesion, ultimately reducing the appeal of insurgency among local populations.⁷

Diplomatic Engagement

On the diplomatic front, India has pursued dialogue with various insurgent groups, seeking to negotiate peace agreements and facilitate disarmament. The government has engaged with different stakeholders, including civil society organizations and traditional leaders, to foster a sense of inclusivity in the peace process. Additionally, diplomatic efforts with neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh aim to address cross-border insurgency issues and enhance cooperation in tackling arms smuggling and refugee flows.⁸

Regional Cooperation

India has also sought to integrate its Northeast region into the broader framework of regional cooperation, particularly through initiatives like the Act East Policy, which aims to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations. This approach not only seeks to enhance trade and connectivity but also aims to stabilize the region by fostering economic interdependence and reducing the influence of external actors in local conflicts. In summary, India's counter-insurgency and diplomatic responses in Northeast India reflect a comprehensive strategy that combines military action, development efforts, and regional diplomacy. While challenges remain, particularly regarding human rights and community relations, these multidimensional approaches are crucial for addressing the underlying issues fuelling insurgency and achieving lasting peace and stability in the region.⁹

India has adopted a multi-pronged approach to counter proxy wars, including:

- a. **Military Operations:** The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and counter-insurgency units have played a crucial role in controlling insurgency.
- b. **Diplomatic Engagements:** India has strengthened ties with Myanmar and Bangladesh to curb cross-border insurgent activities.
- c. **Peace Accords and Dialogue:** Agreements with NSCN-IM and Bodo insurgent groups have helped in conflict resolution.
- d. **Development Initiatives:** Programs like Act East Policy aim to integrate the Northeast with regional economies and reduce alienation.¹⁰

6. CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Despite efforts, several challenges persist, such as porous borders, deep-rooted grievances, and fluctuating foreign policies. A combination of diplomatic strategies, intelligence cooperation, and economic empowerment is crucial for long-term stability.¹¹

The challenges faced by India in addressing insurgency in Northeast India are complex and multifaceted, necessitating a comprehensive and nuanced approach going forward. Here are some key challenges and potential pathways for future progress:

Challenges

1. **Human Rights Violations:** Military operations conducted under AFSPA have led to widespread accusations of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary detention. Such violations contribute to resentment among local communities and can perpetuate cycles of violence.
2. **Ethnic Diversity and Tensions:** Northeast India is characterized by a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, each with distinct identities and aspirations. Managing these diverse interests while promoting national integration poses significant challenges for policymakers.
3. **Cross-Border Insurgency:** Insurgent groups often operate with relative impunity across the porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, receiving support from external actors. This complicates military responses and requires coordinated regional approaches to effectively address the issue.
4. **Socio-Economic Development:** Many regions in Northeast India suffer from underdevelopment, poverty, and lack of access to basic services. Economic grievances can fuel discontent and drive individuals toward insurgency. Tackling these socio-economic issues is essential for long-term stability.
5. **Peace Process Stalemates:** While there have been attempts to negotiate peace with various insurgent groups, many discussions have stalled, leading to frustrations on both sides. This impasse complicates efforts to achieve a sustainable resolution.

The Way Forward

1. **Human Rights Framework:** Establishing a robust accountability mechanism to

investigate and address human rights abuses is critical. This could involve independent oversight bodies and engagement with civil society to rebuild trust between the state and local communities.

2. **Inclusive Governance:** Promoting inclusive governance that respects the rights and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups is essential. This may involve decentralizing governance and empowering local bodies to have a more significant role in decision-making processes.
3. **Comprehensive Development Strategies:** Implementing holistic development programs that focus on education, healthcare, and infrastructure can address the root causes of insurgency. Engaging local communities in planning and execution will enhance the effectiveness of such initiatives.
4. **Enhanced Regional Cooperation:** Strengthening diplomatic ties and cooperation with neighbouring countries, particularly in areas of security and counter-insurgency efforts, is crucial. Joint military exercises and intelligence-sharing can enhance regional stability.
5. **Revitalizing Peace Talks:** Reviving and facilitating dialogue with insurgent groups, incorporating their perspectives into broader peace processes, and addressing their grievances can pave the way for de-escalation. Creating a conducive environment for dialogue is key.
6. **Focus on Community Resilience:** Encouraging civil society participation and fostering community resilience can empower local populations to counter radicalization and violence. Supporting grassroots movements that promote peace and reconciliation can help build a more stable environment. Addressing the challenges of insurgency in Northeast India requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond military solutions. By prioritizing human rights, inclusive governance, socio-economic development, and regional cooperation, India

can work towards a more peaceful and stable future for the region. Engaging with local communities and fostering trust between the government and citizens will be fundamental in overcoming past grievances and building a sustainable path forward.¹²

7. SUGGESTIONS AGAINST BORDER INSURGENCY

1. **Adopt a Comprehensive Peace Framework:** Establish a long-term peace framework that includes all stakeholders, government, insurgent groups, and civil society. This framework should prioritize dialogue, reconciliation, and the gradual integration of insurgent groups into mainstream society.

2. **Reform AFSPA:** Consider reviewing or amending the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to address concerns about human rights violations. Implementing stringent oversight mechanisms can help ensure accountability and reduce the potential for abuse.

3. **Community Engagement:** Foster greater engagement with local communities to understand their grievances and aspirations. Initiatives that involve community leaders in decision-making processes can promote trust and ensure that development initiatives are culturally sensitive and relevant.

4. **Socio-Economic Development Programs:** Develop targeted socio-economic programs aimed at improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure in conflict-affected areas. Addressing issues of poverty and unemployment can reduce the appeal of insurgency and violence.

5. **Strengthen Border Security and Coordination:** Enhance cooperation with neighbouring countries to monitor and control cross-border insurgency. This can involve joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and collaborative initiatives that tackle the root causes of cross-border movements.

6. **Support for Displaced Populations:** Provide support for those displaced by conflict, ensuring that their needs are addressed through humanitarian assistance and

rehabilitation programs. Acknowledging and addressing the plight of these populations can contribute to healing and stability.¹³

7. **Empower Women and Youth:** Implement programs that empower women and youth as active participants in peacebuilding efforts. Engaging these demographics can lead to innovative solutions and bolster community resilience against insurgency.

8. **Promotion of Cultural Heritage:** Support initiatives that promote and preserve the unique cultural identities of various ethnic groups in the region. Celebrating diversity can foster a sense of pride and belonging that counter separatist sentiments.

Fighting border insurgency in Northeast India requires a nuanced and collaborative approach that balances security with development and community engagement. By focusing on inclusive governance, effective dialogue, and the well-being of local populations, India can pave the way toward lasting peace and stability in this diverse and strategically significant region. The path forward is challenging, but with concerted efforts and a commitment to addressing root causes, there is potential for a brighter and more peaceful future for Northeast India.¹⁴

8. CONCLUSION

Proxy war and insurgency in Northeast India remain significant security concerns, necessitating a holistic approach involving regional cooperation, counter-insurgency measures, and sustainable development. Strengthening diplomatic ties, improving border security, and fostering local integration are key to mitigating foreign influence and ensuring lasting peace. The issue of border insurgency in Northeast India is a multifaceted challenge rooted in historical, ethnic, and socio-economic factors.¹⁵ The persistence of violence has not only hindered development but also eroded trust between communities and the government. While the Indian state has employed various strategies, including military

operations and diplomatic engagement, the complex nature of these conflicts requires a re-evaluation of existing approaches. Moving forward, it is imperative to prioritize inclusive governance, human rights, and socio-economic development in order to build lasting peace in the region.

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