



## Cross-Border Challenges and Strategic Cooperation on the Indo-Myanmar Frontier - Riddhik Parashar

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## Key Takeaways

- 1. India-Myanmar Border Length:** The 1643 km long border touches the four North East Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram and has been a focal point for border-related issues.
- 2. Insurgency and Launchpads:** In the past, many Northeast-based insurgents have had their bases in Myanmar just across the Indian border, which often acted as launchpads for their anti-India operations.
- 3. Narcotics Trade Challenge:** The Golden Triangle often acts as a major security challenge for India as the porous border is frequently used for the shipment of narcotic substances, especially heroin.
- 4. Greater Nagalim Threat:** One of the core demands of the former united NSCN has been that of Greater Nagalim or a separate Naga country that would include the Naga areas of Myanmar, entire Nagaland state, parts of Manipur, Assam & Arunachal Pradesh.
- 5. Free Movement Scrapped:** The Free Movement Regime (FMR) allowed border residents to travel up to 16 km without documentation, but the Indian government decided to scrap it due to its misuse by insurgents and drug traffickers.
- 6. Myanmar Coup Dilemma:** The military takeover in Myanmar has put New Delhi in a complex situation as its reluctance to condemn the military regime is tied to security challenges and border stability.
- 7. New Delhi's Strategic Dilemma:** Loud and stern condemnation against the Tatmadaw may act as a strategic blunder considering the age-old bonhomie between the two, which has secured India's security interests.
- 8. Act East Policy is Crucial:** Internal stability in Myanmar is an important factor for India's neighborhood policy, as it is the only Southeast Asian country sharing a land border with India, making it crucial for the success of the Act East Policy.

## Abstract

Amidst the ongoing discourse on cross-border phenomena covering various aspects of the contemporary era from immigration to illicit drug trafficking, the India-Myanmar border can be an interesting case study when it comes to the issues related to cross-border threats and cross-border cooperation. The 1643 km long border touches the four North East Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and has been a focal point for border-related issues. The issue of insurgency has been at the forefront of India-Myanmar relations. In the past, many Northeast-based insurgents have had their bases in Myanmar just across the Indian border which often acted as launchpads for their anti-India operations. This has often been countered by New Delhi in cooperation with the Tatmadaw regime by neutralizing these rebels. From 'Operation Golden Bird' in 1995 to the 2015 cross-border surgical strikes by the Indian armed forces, the strides towards strategic peacebuilding began when many militants surrendered and joined the mainstream starting from the 1997 ceasefire agreement with the NSCN-IM to the framework agreement with the same outfit in 2015. Therefore the issue of armed insurgency is a headache for both countries where their territorial integrity is threatened.

This brief attempts to explore the complexities of the India-Myanmar border by giving a comprehensive analysis of both cross-border threats and cross-border cooperation.

## A Brief Overview of the India-Myanmar Border Dynamics

**'You Can Change Friends But Not Neighbours' - Late Atal Bihari Vajpayee**

The above-mentioned quote by ex-PM late Atal Bihari Vajpayee can be aptly put about the complexities that are intertwined along the Indo-Myanmar border considering the nature of political instability in neighbouring Myanmar whose spillover effects can be witnessed in India that are further manifested in the form of illicit drug trade, cross border migration especially when it comes to the question of the Rohingya community and the recent migration being that of the Chin community following the outbreak of the war between the Myanmar Army (Junta) & different Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOS). The 1643 km long border touches the four North East Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and has been a focal point for border-related issues which have proven to be detrimental as well as issues of bilateral importance between the two countries. The detrimental issues such as drug trafficking via the infamous Golden Triangle Route have been a major security concern for the Indian state. This is further linked to the nexus of the drug mafia and the remnants of the insurgent elements whose major advantage has been the porous nature of the border from where they have engaged in multiple ambushes against the security forces.

However, certain cross-border

phenomena have often acted as agents of cooperation between both countries. This has been possible primarily due to the ethnic overlapping of the population across the border. Many communities like the Nagas and the Zo /Kuki are closely related to their counterparts in the Indian states of Nagaland and Mizoram respectively. This has further led to the development of certain border cooperation mechanisms which have further acted as plus points of India-Myanmar bilateral relations. One such mechanism is the 'Free Movement Regime' (FMR) which came into existence in the year 2018. The FMR played an important role in facilitating cross-border trade and people-to-people contact. Myanmar is one of the starting points of India's 'Act East Policy' whose dimensions have now been integrated into the greater multilateral Indo-Pacific strategy whose underlying objective is to secure and stabilize the crossroads connecting the Indian Ocean periphery to the East Asian Pacific periphery, of

which the South East Asian region is an important and strategic part.

### Cross Border Challenges: Insurgency and Demand for Greater Nagalim

The porous Indo-Myanmar border has been a haven for many North East India-based insurgent outfits. This has been primarily acting as a base for one of the remnants of the NSCN -K (National Socialist Council Of Nagaland -Khaplang). One of the moderate factions of the NSCN - IM has already entered into a framework agreement with the Government of India in August 2015. The presence of the NSCN-K is a matter of ethnic overlapping of the various Naga communities/tribes that inhabit the Sagaing Division of North-Western Myanmar across the Naga hills in India. Under the military-drafted constitution in 2008, the region became a self-administered zone by the name of Naga Self-Administered Zone.



(Source - The Federal News,2024)



(Source - The Indian Express,2015)

One of the core demands of the former united NSCN has been that of Greater Nagalim or a separate Naga country that would include the Naga areas of Myanmar, entire Nagaland state, parts of Manipur, Assam & Arunachal Pradesh.

The aspiration for a Greater Nagalim is seen as threatening the territorial integrity and sovereignty of India from the security perspective and has also been perceived as a sentimental issue for the Naga community considering their relatively autonomous system of governance during the British colonial era. The peace of the region solely depends on the future of the Nagalim movement. The outcome of the 2015 agreement with the NSCN-IM is not out

yet. Meanwhile, the NSCN-K faction continues to exercise its authority in the Naga areas of Myanmar.

## Counter-Insurgency Operations

From time to time, New Delhi has cooperated with the Junta Regime of Myanmar to neutralize the insurgent rebels. From Operation Golden Bird in 1995 to the recent 2015 cross-border surgical strikes by the Indian armed forces, the strides towards strategic peacebuilding began when many militants surrendered and joined the mainstream starting from the 1997 ceasefire agreement with the NSCN-IM to the framework agreement with the

# Flashpoints on the border



**Army comes under attack at 4.45am, returns 'heavy retaliatory fire'**

**June 7, 2017** Major David Manlun died fighting NSCN(K) militants in Nagaland's Mon district. Three militants were also killed.

**Nov 15, 2015** Assam Rifles killed 4 NSCN(K) militants in encounter in Nagaland's Tuensang district.

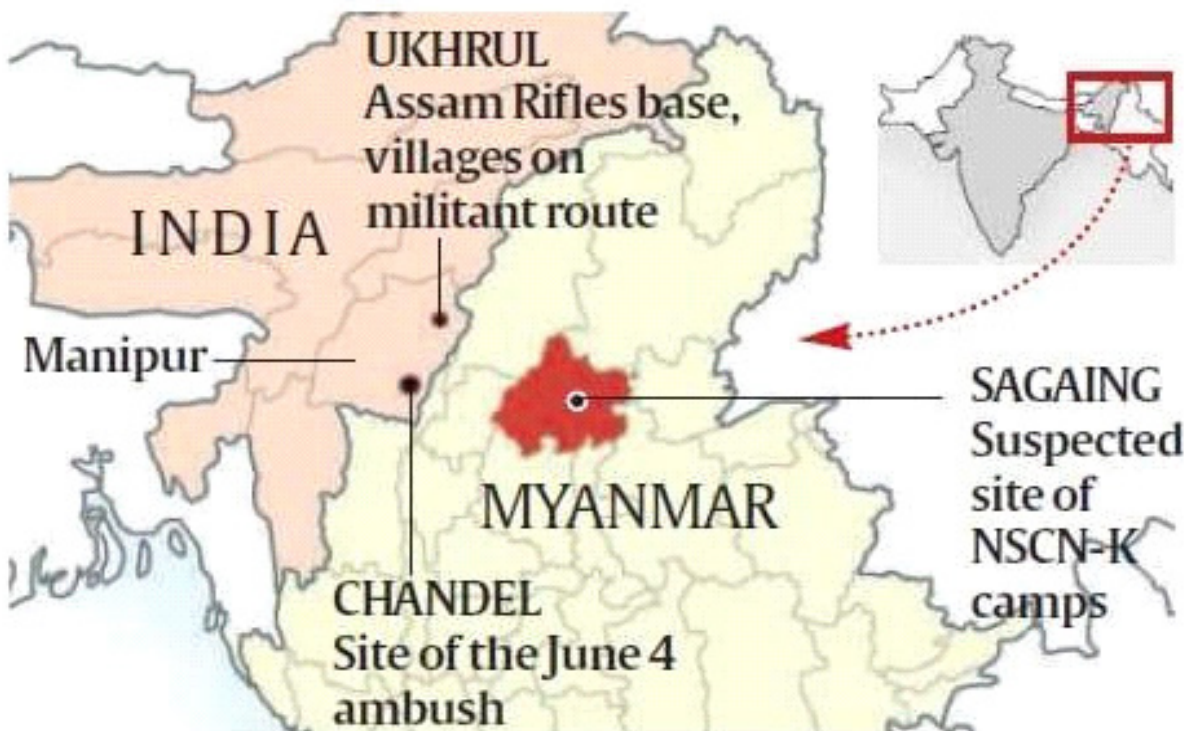
**Aug 29, 2015** Assam Rifles killed 8 NSCN(K) militants in Tuensang.

**June 4, 2015** NSCN(K) ambushed an army convoy in Manipur's Chandel, killing 18 soldiers.

**May 3, 2015** Eight soldiers killed by NSCN(K) militants in Mon district.

(Source - Hindustan Times,2015)

## AREA OF OPERATIONS

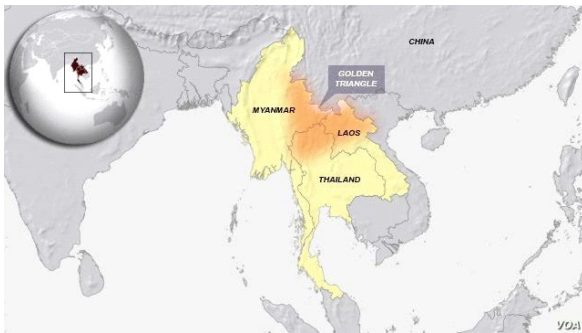


Depiction of 2015 Cross-Border Surgical Strikes (Source - Mantraya.org, 2016)

same outfit in 2015. However, in recent times, attacks on the Indian armed forces have also been witnessed.

### The Golden Triangle

One of the challenging issues with regard to the India-Myanmar cross border dynamics has been the issue of illicit trade of narcotics. The Golden Triangle refers to one of the largest areas of opium production in the world. It is a large, mountainous region of approximately 200,000 km<sup>2</sup> that surpasses north-eastern Myanmar, north western Thailand & northern part of Laos. It is centered around the confluence of the Ruak & Mekong rivers.

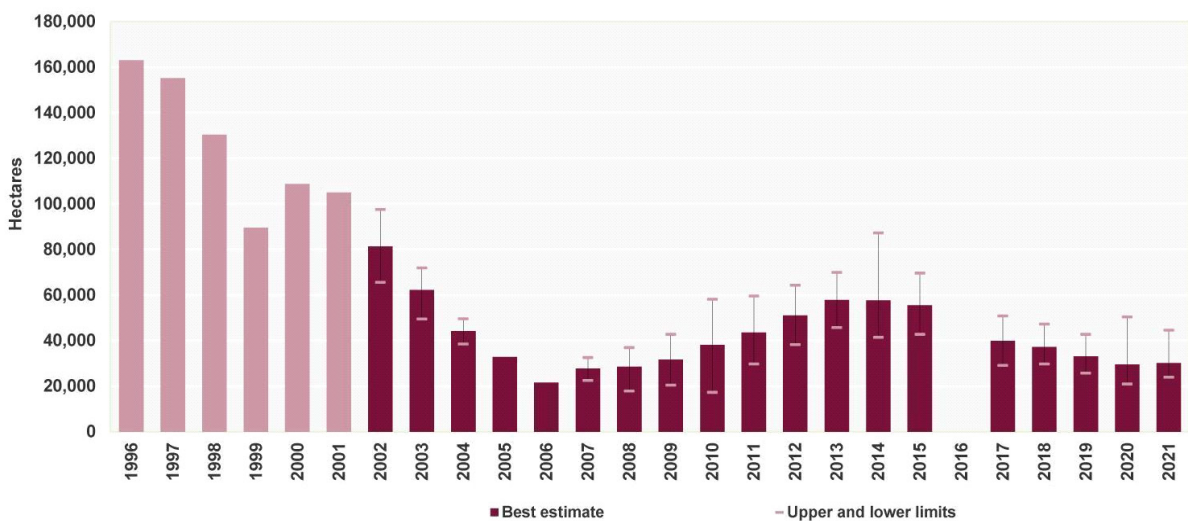


( Source- VOA News,2024)

The Golden Triangle often acts as a major security challenge for India as the porous border is often used for the shipment of narcotic substances, especially heroin. It is noteworthy to mention that Myanmar overtook Afghanistan as the top opium producer according to a report published by the BBC in December 2023. The United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime (UNODC) also warned that Myanmar’s opium production could rise further thereby posing significant security risks across Asia.

However, the menace of drugs is being dealt with firmly by the state police forces of Assam, Manipur & Mizoram. In a recent operation by the Assam Police, a massive amount of drugs worth ₹ 105 cr were seized which primarily consisted of heroin. It was suspected that the consignment was illegally transported from Myanmar via Mizoram. The Assam Rifles too is playing a significant role in curbing the issue of illicit drug trafficking.

The issue of drugs and narcotics has further intensified in recent times in the Indian socio-political scenario due to



Opium Poppy Cultivated in Myanmar,1996-2020 (Source - UNODC Report,2022)



(Source- Hindustan Times,2024)



(Source - North East Now,2022)

the outbreak of the crisis in the state of Manipur bordering Myanmar. Many scholars & experts believe that there is an angle of narcotics behind this social chaos.

### **Rohingya Crisis: ARSA & the Security Threat**

The issue of illegal immigration has been one of the challenging issues concerning the India-Myanmar border equations. This primarily includes the issue of the

Rohingya community who are originally from the Rakhine state of Myanmar. The exodus of the Rohingya people began in 2017 following an ethnic strife in Myanmar. As of December 2022, over 21 thousand Rohingyas were living in India according to the UNHRC. This has further led to the issue becoming one of the subjects of controversy amidst the polarized political dynamics in India. Another major concern associated with it is the issue of potential development of the terror network that has been





- Rohingya terrorists broke the law of No-mans-land and clashed
- 1 killed, 2 including a child injured, Rohingyas leaving camp, 500 houses burnt to ashes among 621 families in camp
- RSO clothes were found on the dead Rohingya militant
- Fire set to camp to evict Rohingyas from zero line
- Rohingyas using weapons like M-16 and AK-47



Firing between separatist groups to create chaos  
 – **Yasmin Parveen Tibriji**  
 Deputy Commissioner,  
 Bandarban



We Have No Jurisdiction to intervene in international law at the Zero Line  
 — **Romen Sharma**  
 UNO, Naikkhongchari

highlighted by security & strategic experts. The experts are of the view that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) may become a security threat if the recruitment of the Rohingyas who are based in India takes place on a massive scale. One of the news reports from the Daily Post (Bangladesh) about the ARSA is listed below:

### Cross-Border Cooperation

The Free Movement Regime (FMR): Certain cross-border phenomena have

often acted as agents of cooperation between both countries. This has been possible primarily due to the ethnic overlapping of the population across the border. Many communities like the Nagas and the Zo/Kuki are closely related to their counterparts in the Indian states of Nagaland and Mizoram respectively. This has further led to the development of certain border cooperation mechanisms which have further acted as plus points of India-Myanmar bilateral relations. One such



mechanism is the 'Free Movement Regime' (FMR) which came into existence in the year 2018. The FMR played an important role in facilitating cross-border trade and people-to-people contact.

The primary objective behind the FMR mechanism was to boost cross-border trade and people-to-people contact in the border areas that would align with the 'Act East Policy'. It allowed for the free movement of people up to 16 km without any visa/documentation.

However, in recent times, the Government of India has decided to scrap this mechanism as they believe that the FMR has been misused by nefarious elements, especially the last remnants of the insurgents and drug traffickers. This has been perceived negatively by the communities that are spread between both sides of the border. This has primarily affected the Chin community who are ethnically related to the Mizo people from the Indian state of Mizoram. In many instances the Mizoram govt has come



out in support of this community. Apart from the FMR issue, there has also been a mass exodus of the Chin people from the Chin state of Myanmar to different districts in Mizoram due to the internal turmoil that engulfed with the beginning of the military coup in 2021.

## New Delhi & The Junta: The Historical Bonhomie

The military takeover in Myanmar has put New Delhi in a complex situation as its reluctance to condemn and disregard the military regime can be seen from different perspectives which is sacrosanct for India's security challenges. The porous Indo-Myanmar has been a haven for many North East India-based insurgent outfits. From time to time, New Delhi has cooperated with the Tatmadaw regime to neutralize these rebels whose aims and objectives threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of India. From 'Operation Golden Bird' in 1995 to the 2015 cross-border surgical strikes by the Indian armed forces, the strides towards strategic peacebuilding began when many militants surrendered and joined the mainstream starting from the 1997 ceasefire agreement with the NSCN-IM to the framework agreement with the same outfit in 2015. Therefore the issue of armed insurgency is a headache for both countries where their territorial integrity is threatened. However, India has not ventured into some collaborations with the Myanmar army to solve its insurgency problem and has always maintained a constant position of promoting internal peace and stability in Myanmar.

## Conclusion

Internal stability in Myanmar is an important factor for India's neighbourhood policy as it is the only Southeast Asian country sharing a land border with India which makes it an important player in the smooth facilitation of Act East Policy. Faced with multiple complexities, New Delhi faces a dilemma about the situation in Myanmar. Loud and stern condemnation against the Tatmadaw may act as a strategic blunder considering the age-old bonhomie between the two which has secured India's security interests.

Therefore, New Delhi can play

an important role as the regional peacemaker in the region by involving many like-minded countries to bring the different warring groups, democratic political groups and the military regime to a negotiating table for a peaceful settlement of the conflict which is beneficial for Myanmar and the whole region. India's North Eastern region is the primary crossroad connecting South East Asia where the 'Act East Policy' has eventually led to synchronizing the overall developmental initiatives in the region. So a stable and peaceful Myanmar is a path towards the completion of India's aspirations for engaging with the South East Asian region.

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## About the Author



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