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Border Disputes and Security Challenges in North East India

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Abstract: North East India occupies a strategically significant position at the intersection of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The region comprises Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and shares international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. It also contains several historically contested inter-state boundaries, particularly involving Assam and its neighboring states. These geographical and political conditions have made border management a central component of India's national-security policy. This paper examines the major border disputes and security challenges affecting North East India. It argues that the region's security problems cannot be understood solely through the conventional lens of territorial defiance. Historical boundary-making, ethnic identities, competing territorial claims, insurgency, transnational crime, irregular migration, drug trafficking, refugee movements, weak infrastructure and the strategic competition between India and China interact to create a complex security environment. At the same time, the region has experienced substantial improvement in its security situation since the mid-2010s, supported by peace agreements, improved connectivity, stronger border infrastructure and greater cooperation between governments. The paper analyses inter-state disputes involving Assam, the international borders with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and the relationship between border insecurity and insurgency. It concludes that a durable security framework requires a combination of diplomatic engagement, negotiated boundary settlement, improved infrastructure, community participation, intelligence cooperation, economic development and respect for the cultural and political aspirations of border communities.

Keywords: North East India, border disputes, national security, insurgency, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

North East India is one of the most strategically important and politically complex regions of the country. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the North Eastern Region has approximately 5,484 km of international borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal. The region is also characterized by considerable ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, with more than 200 ethnic groups. The security environment of North East India is shaped by two overlapping categories of disputes. The first consists of inter-state territorial disputes, particularly those involving Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. These disputes are largely rooted in the colonial history of boundary-making and the subsequent reorganization of states after independence. The second consists of international-border challenges, including India's unresolved boundary with China, the porous and difficult-to-monitor India-Myanmar frontier and security and migration concerns along the India-Bangladesh border. Historically, insurgency was among the most serious security challenges in the region. Various armed organizations demanded independence, greater autonomy, separate states or protection of ethnic and territorial interests. The difficult terrain and international borders occasionally enabled insurgent groups to establish links, obtain supplies or seek sanctuary outside Indian territory. Research by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) has highlighted the historical role of external sanctuaries and cross-border support in sustaining insurgency. However, the security situation has changed significantly. The Government of India reports that the security situation in the North East has improved substantially since 2014. Peace agreements, surrender and rehabilitation programmes, improved infrastructure and negotiations with insurgent groups have contributed to this change. Nevertheless, the persistence of territorial disputes, ethnic tensions and developments in neighboring countries means that North East India remains a strategically sensitive region.

Objectives of the Study:

- To examine the historical origins of border disputes in North East India.
- To analyse major inter-state boundary disputes involving Assam and neighboring states.
- To examine security challenges along the international borders with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.
- To analyse the relationship between border insecurity, insurgency, organized crime and ethnic conflict.
- To evaluate existing governmental responses to these challenges.
- To suggest policy measures for strengthening border security while promoting peace and development.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including Government of India publications, Ministry of Home Affairs documents, parliamentary records, official releases, policy papers and research publications from defiance and strategic-studies institutions. The analysis combines historical, political, geographical and security perspectives. Rather than treating border disputes simply as territorial disagreements, the paper approaches them as multidimensional problems involving state formation, ethnic identity, resource competition, governance, development and international relations.

Geopolitical Significance of North East India

The strategic importance of North East India derives from its location. The region connects India with Southeast Asia and forms an important component of India's Act East Policy. Its borders extend across difficult mountainous, forested and riverine terrain. The Ministry of Home Affairs identifies Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal as the international neighbors connected to the wider North Eastern Region. The region's geography produces both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Connectivity with neighboring countries can facilitate legitimate trade, tourism and cultural interaction. At the same time, poorly monitored border areas can be exploited for smuggling, trafficking, illegal movement and insurgent activities. The security problem is further complicated by the fact that political boundaries do not always correspond with ethnic or cultural boundaries. Communities living along the international frontiers often have historical, linguistic and familial relationships that cross national boundaries. Consequently, strict border controls can have social consequences, while weak border controls can create security vulnerabilities. Thus, effective border management requires a balance between security, connectivity and the interests of border communities.

Inter-State Border Disputes in North East India

Many inter-state border disputes in North East India have their origins in colonial administrative arrangements. British authorities frequently altered administrative boundaries according to changing political and administrative requirements. These boundaries did not always reflect the territorial, cultural or customary claims of local communities. After independence, the creation of new states altered the administrative map of the region. Several states were carved out of the former territory of Assam, including Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The resulting boundaries generated competing interpretations of historical administrative limits. MP-IDSA notes that many of the region's inter-state disputes originated during the colonial period and became more pronounced after the reorganization of states. Their continuation has contributed to tensions between neighboring states and, in some cases, affected the security environment. The principal inter-state disputes include those between: Assam and Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya, Assam and Mizoram. The Ministry of Home Affairs has officially recognized these four disputes as major inter-state boundary disputes in the region. **Assam–Nagaland Border Dispute:** The Assam–Nagaland boundary dispute is among the oldest and most complicated territorial disputes in North East India. It emerged after Nagaland became a separate state in 1963. The dispute involves competing interpretations of historical boundaries and claims over forested and resource-rich areas. The issue has occasionally produced violent confrontations, resulting in loss of life and displacement. The dispute illustrates the difficulty of resolving boundaries where historical administrative records conflict with local perceptions of traditional territory. The extensive forest terrain also makes physical demarcation and routine administration difficult. The Government of India has generally adopted the position that such disputes should be resolved through negotiations between the concerned state governments, with the Union government acting as a facilitator.

Assam–Arunachal Pradesh Border Dispute: Assam shares approximately 804 km of inter-state boundary with Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh has historically claimed a number of villages situated along the boundary, while Assam has disputed some of these claims. The issue has involved competing interpretations of historical administrative arrangements and local land rights. A significant development occurred in April 2023, when Assam and Arunachal Pradesh signed an agreement concerning 123 disputed villages. The agreement was intended to constitute a full and final settlement regarding these villages and prevent the raising of new claims concerning them. The agreement demonstrates the potential of negotiated solutions. However, implementation, physical demarcation and acceptance by local populations remain crucial for translating political agreements into durable peace.

Assam–Meghalaya Border Dispute: Assam and Meghalaya have had a long-standing boundary dispute involving 12 areas of difference. The dispute has periodically produced tension among communities living along the boundary. A major breakthrough came on 29 March 2022, when the two states signed an agreement covering six of the twelve areas of difference. The agreement represented an important attempt to settle the dispute through political negotiation, joint assessment and demarcation. The Assam–Meghalaya experience is significant because it demonstrates that inter-state disputes do not necessarily require prolonged judicial or coercive approaches. Bilateral negotiations, regional committees, public consultation and technical demarcation can provide a framework for settlement.

Assam–Mizoram Border Dispute: The Assam–Mizoram dispute has particularly strong historical and political dimensions. The boundary reflects different interpretations of colonial-era administrative arrangements, while local

communities have developed competing understandings of territorial ownership. The dispute became especially serious following violent clashes in July 2021, demonstrating that unresolved boundaries can become wider law-and-order and security problems. The episode showed how territorial disputes can interact with political mobilization, ethnic identity and social media-driven narratives. The Government of India has recognized Assam–Mizoram, alongside the other Assam-related disputes, as an inter-state boundary issue requiring cooperation between the states.

International Border Challenges

India–China Border: The India–China border in the eastern sector is strategically significant because China's territorial claims include areas of Arunachal Pradesh, which India considers an integral part of the country. The border is difficult to manage because of high-altitude terrain, incomplete mutual agreement on the Line of Actual Control and competing territorial perceptions. The wider India–China relationship also has a direct impact on the security environment of Arunachal Pradesh. The Government of India has invested in roads, border outposts, foot tracks, helipads and other infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh and other areas along the China border. As of August 2026, India–China border management remains strategically important despite diplomatic efforts to stabilize bilateral relations. Recent reporting has again highlighted concerns surrounding the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, while both governments have continued to emphasise the importance of maintaining peace and communication along the disputed frontier. The China challenge is therefore different from most other security challenges in North East India. It involves conventional military competition, strategic infrastructure, territorial claims and great-power rivalry rather than primarily internal insurgency.

India–Myanmar Border and Security: The India–Myanmar border extends for approximately 1,643 km, passing through Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The frontier consists largely of difficult mountainous and forested terrain. The border has historically been difficult to monitor because ethnic communities exist on both sides and cross-border movement has traditionally been common. These social connections are important for local livelihoods but can also complicate conventional border-control mechanisms. Myanmar's prolonged political crisis has added a new dimension. Armed conflict inside Myanmar has produced displacement, refugee movements and increased uncertainty along India's northeastern frontier. MP-IDSA has noted the impact of Myanmar's civil war on India's bordering northeastern states. Another major concern is narcotics trafficking. Research published by MP-IDSA has highlighted the relationship between instability in Myanmar, drug trafficking, transnational criminal networks and insurgent financing along the India–Myanmar border. Consequently, India's Myanmar-border policy has to address several challenges simultaneously: insurgent movement, refugee and displacement pressures, narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, ethnic conflict, transnational criminal networks and political instability inside Myanmar.

India–Bangladesh Border: Bangladesh is particularly important for North East India's security because of the length of the shared border and the region's economic and demographic connections with Bangladesh. The India–Bangladesh border is approximately 4,096.7 km long nationally and passes through Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in the North Eastern Region. It contains plains, rivers, forests and densely populated areas, making surveillance and physical border management difficult in several stretches. Historically, the border has been associated with concerns about irregular cross-border migration, smuggling, human trafficking, narcotics, arms movement, cattle and other forms of contraband, insurgent movement and safe havens etc. At the same time, it is important to distinguish legitimate cross-border mobility and trade from illegal activities. Border communities often have long-standing economic and social relationships that predate modern national boundaries. The improvement of India–Bangladesh security cooperation has nevertheless been important in reducing the space available to insurgent groups. India's wider engagement with Bangladesh has therefore become an important component of North East India's security architecture.

Insurgency as a Security Challenge

Insurgency has historically been one of the defining security challenges of North East India. Different movements have emerged from distinct political, ethnic and historical circumstances. Their objectives have ranged from sovereignty and independence to greater autonomy and protection of ethnic identity. The relationship between insurgency and international borders is particularly important. Difficult terrain and international boundaries have historically enabled armed groups to establish bases, move personnel and access supplies outside Indian Territory. Research on the external dynamics of Northeast insurgency has documented historical assistance and sanctuary involving actors and territories in India's neighborhood. However, insurgency should not be reduced to an external-security problem. Its roots have often included.

- Perceived political Marginalization
- Ethnic Insecurity
- Disputes Over Land and Resources
- Inadequate Governance
- Demands for Greater Autonomy;
- Unemployment and underdevelopment and
- Historical Grievances

A purely military response therefore cannot permanently eliminate insurgency. Sustainable peace requires political

negotiation, institutional reform, economic development and community participation.

Government Responses

- **Negotiated Settlement of Inter-State Disputes:** The Union government has increasingly encouraged state governments to resolve boundary disputes through dialogue and negotiated mechanisms. The Assam–Meghalaya agreement of 2022 and Assam–Arunachal Pradesh agreement of 2023 demonstrates the potential of this approach. The central government generally acts as a facilitator rather than imposing unilateral settlements, recognizing that long-term acceptance requires cooperation from the states concerned.
- **Border Infrastructure:** The Border Infrastructure and Management programme supports border roads, fencing, floodlighting, border outposts and technological surveillance. The Ministry of Home Affairs has also pursued integrated border-management systems combining manpower, sensors, networks, intelligence and command-and-control capabilities.
- **Peace Agreements and Rehabilitation:** Peace negotiations and rehabilitation programmes have contributed to the reduction of insurgency. The signing of agreements with several armed groups has facilitated the surrender of cadres and their reintegration into civilian life. The reduction in insurgent violence demonstrates that political engagement can complement security operations.
- **Security Cooperation with Neighboring Countries:** Cooperation with Bangladesh and Myanmar is especially important. Cross-border security cooperation can reduce insurgent sanctuary, disrupt criminal networks and improve intelligence exchange. India's security policy in the North East therefore cannot be separated from its foreign policy towards neighboring countries.

Major Problems in Existing Approaches

- **Fragmented Institutional Coordination:** Border security involves the Army, Assam Rifles, Border Security Force, state police, intelligence agencies, civil administration and diplomatic institutions. Coordination among these agencies is essential but difficult because they operate under different mandates.
- **Local Alienation:** Excessive militarization without adequate community engagement can generate distrust among border populations. Border communities should be treated as partners in security rather than merely as subjects of surveillance.
- **Incomplete Boundary Demarcation:** Political agreements do not automatically eliminate disputes. Physical demarcation, land records, compensation and local acceptance remain necessary.
- **Difficult Terrain:** Mountainous, forested and riverine terrain makes continuous physical surveillance expensive and technically challenging.
- **Regional Instability:** Political instability in neighboring Myanmar creates security problems that cannot be solved solely within India's territory.

Policy Recommendations

- **Establish Permanent Inter-State Boundary Mechanisms:** A permanent institutional mechanism should monitor unresolved boundary disputes and facilitate regular dialogue between neighboring states. Such a mechanism could include representatives of state governments, local administrations, survey authorities and affected communities.
- **Strengthen Community-Based Border Management:** Local communities possess valuable knowledge of terrain, migration patterns and cross-border networks. Village-level consultation and community liaison mechanisms should therefore form part of border-management strategies.
- **Combine Physical and Technological Surveillance:** Fencing alone is insufficient in mountainous and forested terrain. Surveillance drones, sensors, satellite imagery, communication networks and integrated command systems should complement physical infrastructure.
- **Develop Border Areas Economically:** Border villages require better roads, healthcare, schools, telecommunications, markets and livelihood opportunities. Economic integration can reduce incentives for participation in illicit cross-border activities.
- **Expand Cross-Border Cooperation:** India should strengthen cooperation with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and other neighbours on intelligence sharing, trafficking, customs, disaster management and border trade.
- **Address the Political Roots of Insurgency:** Counter-insurgency policy should combine security measures with dialogue, autonomy arrangements, rehabilitation and inclusive governance. The objective should be not merely the defeat of armed organisations but the resolution of the grievances that sustain them.
- **Strengthen India's Eastern Strategic Infrastructure:** Connectivity projects should be developed with both economic and strategic objectives in mind. Roads, bridges, airfields, telecommunications and logistics networks are essential for rapid movement of security forces as well as civilian development.
- **Adopt a Human-Security Approach:** Security policy should incorporate displacement, livelihood security, human rights, environmental protection and social cohesion. Border populations should not bear disproportionate costs of national-security policies.

3. CONCLUSION

Border disputes and security challenges in North East India are products of a complex interaction between history, geography, ethnicity, state formation, international relations and development. The region's inter-state boundary disputes largely emerged from colonial administrative boundaries and the reorganization of states after independence. The disputes involving Assam and Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram demonstrate how unresolved territorial questions can affect social relations and public order. At the same time, international borders with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh introduce additional challenges involving military competition, insurgency, migration, narcotics and transnational crime. The future of North East India's security depends on moving beyond a narrow conception of border protection. Secure borders require effective governance, economically viable border communities, reliable infrastructure, political dialogue and constructive relations with neighboring countries. The most sustainable strategy is therefore one in which security and development reinforce one another. Territorial integrity must remain a core national objective, but it can best be protected when the people living in border regions have confidence in institutions, access to economic opportunities and a meaningful role in decisions concerning their land and political future.

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