



Bangladesh's Role in Cross-Border Security Challenges in India's Northeastern Region

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This paper discusses the role of the country Bangladesh in the trans-border security problems affecting India's North-Eastern Region. It examines how, the dynamic of border between Bangladesh and India plays an important role in the culminating and intensification of the insurgent activities in the North East India. It examines the ways in which insurgent organizations use the border to their advantage, and evaluates existing border management practices. It also analyses the geo-political tensions and Bangladesh's internal politics that play important factors in the regional stability. The paper presents a study, which includes a detailed examination of diplomacy and international relations, on the significance of transformations in relations between countries towards insurgency dynamics through field research and case studies. The results identify key areas for improving cooperation and offer policy recommendations to more effectively address these security threats and promote regional stability.

Keywords: *Cross-Border Security, Insurgency, Border Management, Regional Stability, Security Cooperation, Terrorism, Counter-Insurgency.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Northeastern part of India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim & Tripura is a beautiful fusion of geography and culture. Rather than being just an extension of the land itself, it is a cultural kaleidoscope full of different nationalities, cultures, and customs, each with their own ethnic communities, languages, and customs, which enriches its unique character. Its importance goes beyond the sea shores, being India's gateway to Southeast Asia with a prominent place in the Act

East Policy which aims to improve the relations of India with the eastern nations.

Landlocked between China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Northeast is a conflux of histories and shared destinies. Among these adjacent countries, Bangladesh holds a unique position in view of its historical and socio-political amity with the region. The impact of the 1947 partition and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 significantly influenced the Northeastern states, which changed the dimensions of its security, economy, and society. These tectonic shifts were not simply moments in history; they

were paradigm-crossing, identity-shattering, challenge-reshaping moments that left a permanent mark, resonating across the region, transforming its present and shaping its future.

2. A Brief Overview of the Security Challenges in India's Northeastern Region

The beauty of the Northeast belies the persistent challenges its people face. The region has long been a flashpoint for security issues, with several factors contributing to its fragile stability:

- **Insurgency:** For decades, insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), and others have sought to assert control, claiming causes ranging from ethnic identity to independence. These groups often take advantage of the rugged hills and forests, as well as the porous international borders, to sustain their operations. Their actions disrupt daily life, hamper development, and create a pervasive sense of uncertainty.
- **Illegal Migration:** Migration, particularly from neighbouring Bangladesh, has been a deeply contentious issue. This movement of people has changed the demographic makeup of the region, often sparking social and political tensions. For locals, the influx can feel like a threat to their cultural identity and access to resources. This issue is not just about numbers; it's about the fear of losing what makes each community unique.
- **Human Trafficking:** The region's proximity to international borders and socio-economic challenges make it a hotspot for human trafficking. Vulnerable women and children are often the targets, falling victim to exploitative networks that rob them of their dignity and futures. Behind every statistic is a heartbreaking story of someone's daughter, sister, or child being forced into unimaginable circumstances.
- **Smuggling:** Smuggling—of arms, drugs, and other illegal goods—thrives in the region's rugged and often under-policed terrain. This illicit trade fuels other security problems, such as insurgency, and undermines local economies. For border communities, smuggling is not just a

distant crime but a part of their daily reality, bringing both risks and dilemmas.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF BANGLADESH IN THESE CHALLENGES

Bangladesh's geographical position plays a critical role in the cross-border security dynamics of India's Northeastern region. The long and porous border shared by the two countries is both a conduit for legitimate trade and an avenue for illegal activities. Bangladesh's internal policies and its relationship with India are crucial in shaping the security landscape of the Northeastern states.

The cooperation between India and Bangladesh in managing these security challenges has seen significant improvements, particularly since 2009 under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration. Bangladesh's proactive stance in curbing insurgent activities within its territory, enhancing border management, and fostering bilateral ties has contributed to regional stability. However, challenges remain, and the effectiveness of these measures continues to be a subject of analysis and policy debate.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Northeastern region of India has long been a hotbed of insurgency, with various ethnic and political movements emerging over the decades. This tumultuous history can be traced back to the mid-20th century when the Indian subcontinent underwent significant geopolitical changes. The partition of British India in 1947 and the subsequent creation of East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh) had profound implications for the region.

Insurgent movements in the Northeastern states have been driven by a complex interplay of factors, including ethnic identity, demands for autonomy, and socio-economic disparities. Some of the key insurgent groups include:

- **United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA):** Established in 1979, ULFA has been one of the most prominent insurgent groups in Assam, advocating for the state's independence from India. The group has carried out numerous attacks on government installations, security forces, and civilians, leveraging the region's challenging terrain to conduct guerrilla warfare.

- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN): Formed in 1980, the NSCN has been fighting for the sovereignty of the Naga people. The group has split into factions over the years, with the primary factions being NSCN-IM (Isak-Muivah) and NSCN-K (Khaplang). Both factions have engaged in armed conflict with Indian security forces and have sought to establish a Greater Nagaland, encompassing parts of neighboring states and Myanmar.
- National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB): Founded in 1986, the NDFB demands a separate Bodoland for the Bodo people in Assam. The group has been involved in violent clashes with security forces, as well as inter-ethnic conflicts with other communities in the region.
- Manipur People's Liberation Front (PLF): Active since the 1970s, the PLF aims for the independence of Manipur. The group has carried out attacks on security personnel and government facilities, exploiting the state's difficult terrain and proximity to international borders. These insurgent groups have not only challenged the authority of the Indian state but have also created a climate of fear and instability in the Northeastern region. The porous borders with neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, have facilitated the movement of insurgents, arms, and supplies, complicating efforts to establish lasting peace and security.

5. BANGLADESH'S HISTORICAL ROLE

Bangladesh's involvement in the insurgency dynamics of India's Northeastern region has been multifaceted and influenced by historical, political, and strategic considerations. Following the partition of British India in 1947, East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) became a key player in the regional security landscape. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, India provided crucial support to the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi guerrilla resistance movement fighting against Pakistani forces. This collaboration laid the groundwork for the subsequent relationship between India and Bangladesh.

However, in the years following Bangladesh's independence, the country became a

sanctuary for various insurgent groups from India's Northeast. In the 1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts and other border areas were reportedly used by insurgent groups such as ULFA and NSCN to establish bases, procure arms, and plan operations. The porous border and the challenging terrain facilitated the movement of insurgents and contraband, complicating India's counter-insurgency efforts.

The relationship between India and Bangladesh regarding insurgency has evolved significantly over the years. A turning point came with the election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2009. Her government adopted a more cooperative stance towards India, focusing on improving bilateral relations and regional security. Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh has taken substantial steps to dismantle insurgent camps, arrest and extradite insurgent leaders, and curb the flow of arms and supplies across the border. This proactive approach has led to a significant reduction in cross-border insurgent activities and has strengthened the security cooperation between the two countries.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Political changes within Bangladesh, regional dynamics, and the involvement of other external actors can influence the insurgency landscape. The restoration of maritime links between Bangladesh and Pakistan, for instance, has raised concerns about potential arms smuggling and support for insurgent groups.

Understanding the historical context of insurgency and Bangladesh's role is crucial for addressing current security challenges and fostering regional stability. The intricate interplay of historical events, geopolitical considerations, and contemporary security dynamics underscores the need for continued cooperation and strategic engagement between India and Bangladesh to ensure lasting peace in the Northeastern region.

6. CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS

Since taking office in 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration has significantly altered Bangladesh's approach to cross-border security, emphasizing cooperation with India to combat insurgency and enhance border management. This shift marks a departure from earlier periods where insurgent groups from India's Northeast found sanctuary within Bangladeshi territory.

One of the most notable policy changes was the crackdown on insurgent camps and the arrest and extradition of key militant leaders operating from within Bangladesh. The Hasina government recognized that harbouring insurgents posed a threat to both national and regional security and took decisive actions to eliminate these sanctuaries. For instance, in 2009, the Bangladeshi government handed over Arabinda Rajkhowa, the chairman of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), to Indian authorities.

Additionally, the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh was strengthened through various treaties and agreements aimed at enhancing security cooperation. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) of 2015 resolved long-standing border disputes and facilitated better border management. Joint exercises and training programs between the Border Security Force (BSF) of India and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) have been instrumental in fostering trust and operational synergy (**Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022**).

These policy shifts have had a profound impact on cross-border security, significantly reducing insurgent activities and illegal cross-border movements. However, the dynamic and evolving nature of security threats necessitates continuous adaptation and collaboration between the two nations.

7. INDIA-BANGLADESH COOPERATION

The cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the realm of security has seen marked improvements over the past decade. Several key initiatives underscore the depth of this collaboration:

Joint Border Patrols: Regular joint patrols by the BSF and BGB have been effective in monitoring and securing the long and porous border. These patrols help in curbing illegal activities such as smuggling, human trafficking, and unauthorized crossings.

54th Bi-Annual Director General Level Talks (2024): During these talks, the Border Security Force (BSF) of India and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) agreed to increase coordinated patrols, especially during late-night hours in vulnerable areas. This initiative aims to reduce attacks on BSF personnel by criminals from Bangladesh and to educate bordering populations about the sanctity of the International Border (IB).

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Drills (2023): The Indian Navy and Bangladesh Navy conducted joint patrols and exercises in the Northern Bay of Bengal, including a Search and Rescue scenario at sea. These drills enhance interoperability and mutual understanding between the two navies.

Joint Technical Committee for Border Management (2024): Both countries have established joint technical committees to discuss and implement measures for effective border management, including the construction of border fencing and the inspection of boundary pillars.

Intelligence Sharing: Enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms have been established to preempt and address security threats. This collaboration has led to successful operations against insurgent groups and criminal networks operating along the border.

Extradition Agreements: The signing of extradition treaties has facilitated the transfer of wanted criminals and insurgents between the two countries. This has been crucial in dismantling insurgent infrastructure and bringing key operatives to justice.

The effectiveness of these initiatives is evident in the reduction of cross-border insurgent activities and the improvement in overall border security. For example, the joint operations conducted in 2013 led to the apprehension of several high-profile insurgent leaders and the seizure of substantial arms caches (**Rana, M. S. (2018)**).

8. CURRENT CHALLENGES

8.1. Border Management Issues

Managing the 4,096-kilometer-long border between India and Bangladesh poses significant challenges due to its geographical and infrastructural complexities. The border traverses a diverse terrain comprising rivers, hills, and dense forests, making surveillance and patrolling difficult.

Infrastructure gaps, such as insufficient border fencing and lack of advanced monitoring technology, further complicate effective border management. Efforts to address these issues include the construction of additional border outposts, installation of surveillance equipment, and upgrading of existing infrastructure. However, these measures require substantial financial and

logistical resources (Sayedur, Rahman., Md., Shariful, Islam. (2024).

8.2. Illegal Migration

Illegal migration is a contentious issue that has socio-economic and political ramifications for both India and Bangladesh. The influx of migrants from Bangladesh into India's Northeastern states has led to demographic shifts, straining local resources and exacerbating ethnic tensions.

Efforts to manage illegal migration include strengthening border controls, improving the accuracy and efficiency of border checks, and implementing socio-economic development programs in border areas to reduce the push factors driving migration. These measures aim to balance security concerns with humanitarian considerations (Sarma, M. (2015).

8.3. Residual Insurgent Networks

Despite significant progress in dismantling major insurgent groups, residual insurgent networks continue to operate in the region. These groups exploit local grievances, cross-border ethnic ties, and the challenging terrain to sustain their activities.

Ongoing counter-insurgency operations are essential to neutralize these threats. Enhanced coordination between Indian and Bangladeshi security forces, coupled with robust intelligence sharing, is crucial in addressing the activities of these residual networks (Nag, 2002).

9. BANGLADESH'S ROLE IN CROSS-BORDER SECURITY

9.1. Positive Developments

In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant strides in its counter-insurgency efforts, which have had a substantial impact on regional stability. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has adopted a proactive stance towards curbing insurgent activities within its borders. This shift in policy has led to several notable successes.

For instance, the establishment of the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) and the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC) unit within the Bangladesh police has been instrumental in combating terrorism and insurgency. These units have conducted numerous raids on militant hideouts, resulting in the capture and arrest of key insurgent leaders. Additionally,

the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) has played a crucial role in dismantling insurgent networks and preventing cross-border terrorist activities.

A prime example of these efforts is the 2013 operation that led to the capture of several high-profile insurgent leaders and the seizure of significant arms caches. This operation not only disrupted the activities of insurgent groups but also sent a clear message about Bangladesh's commitment to regional security.

Despite these positive developments, there are several areas where Bangladesh's cooperation could be further improved. One of the major challenges is the porous nature of the India-Bangladesh border. The difficult terrain and lack of adequate infrastructure make effective surveillance and patrolling a formidable task. This porous border is often exploited by insurgent groups, smugglers, and traffickers, posing a continuous threat to regional security.

Furthermore, socio-economic disparities in the border regions can drive illegal migration and smuggling, complicating security efforts. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including enhancing border management infrastructure, improving socio-economic conditions, and fostering community engagement (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022).

Another obstacle is the occasional political friction between the two countries, which can hinder effective cooperation. Ensuring consistent and transparent communication channels is vital for sustained collaboration and mutual trust.

10. INDIA'S RESPONSE

India has responded to cross-border security challenges through a combination of diplomatic, military, and developmental strategies. Diplomatically, India has engaged in high-level talks and strategic dialogues with Bangladesh to strengthen cooperation and intelligence sharing. These discussions have been pivotal in building trust and aligning security policies (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

On the military front, India has increased its border security presence, conducted joint patrols with Bangladeshi forces, and engaged in joint counter-terrorism exercises. These initiatives aim to enhance operational readiness and interoperability between the two nations' security forces. Joint exercises, such as the recent

ones in the Northern Bay of Bengal, have been particularly effective in improving coordination and response capabilities.

Developmentally, India has supported various infrastructure projects and socio-economic programs in the border areas. These initiatives are designed to address the root causes of illegal migration and smuggling by providing local communities with better economic opportunities and improving living standards. Enhancing border infrastructure, such as constructing additional border outposts and installing advanced surveillance equipment, has also been a key focus.

Collectively, these efforts have contributed to regional stability and security. However, the dynamic and evolving nature of security threats necessitates continued adaptation and collaboration between India and Bangladesh.

11. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

The security dynamics between India and Bangladesh are a cornerstone of regional stability in South Asia. Their relationship, characterized by both cooperation and occasional tension, influences the broader geopolitical environment in the region. Enhanced security cooperation between India and Bangladesh can serve as a model for other South Asian countries, fostering an environment of mutual trust and collaboration.

Effective border management and counter-insurgency efforts by both nations contribute to a reduction in cross-border terrorism and insurgency, promoting peace and stability. Additionally, strong bilateral relations can mitigate the influence of external powers seeking to exploit regional vulnerabilities. For instance, India's Act East Policy and Bangladesh's Look East Policy align well, promoting regional integration and economic development.

International actors, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), play crucial roles in promoting regional security. The UN provides a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution, offering peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance in times of crisis. For example, the UN has been involved in monitoring and mediating conflicts in South Asia, helping to prevent escalation.

ASEAN, on the other hand, promotes regional cooperation and integration. Through forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), member states, including India and Bangladesh, can engage in dialogue on security issues, share best practices, and develop collaborative strategies. ASEAN's emphasis on non-interference and consensus-building aids in maintaining regional stability and fostering diplomatic relations (Acharya, A. (2021).

Security challenges in South Asia significantly impact economic development. Persistent instability can deter investment, disrupt trade, and hamper economic growth. The Northeastern region of India, for example, has immense economic potential, but insurgency and cross-border crime have hindered its development.

Collaborative efforts between India and Bangladesh can address these challenges by enhancing border security, reducing insurgency, and promoting economic integration. Improved infrastructure, such as better roads and trade routes, can facilitate commerce and development. Joint economic initiatives, like cross-border trade agreements and special economic zones, can boost local economies and create job opportunities.

Moreover, addressing socio-economic disparities through targeted development programs can reduce the incentives for illegal activities and migration. Enhancing education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities in border areas will foster sustainable development and long-term stability (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022).

12. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Bangladesh, sharing a lengthy and porous border with India, plays a critical role in shaping the security dynamics of the Northeastern region. Historical ties, socio-political factors, and contemporary geopolitical considerations all contribute to the significance of Bangladesh in addressing these security challenges.

Bangladesh's proactive counter-insurgency measures, particularly under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration, have led to substantial improvements in regional security. The dismantling of insurgent camps, arrest and extradition of key militant leaders, and enhanced cooperation with Indian security forces exemplify

Bangladesh's commitment to combating cross-border insurgency and terrorism.

Despite these positive developments, challenges such as porous borders, socio-economic disparities, and occasional political friction remain. Effective border management, sustained socio-economic development, and consistent diplomatic engagement are essential for addressing these challenges.

Increase investment in border infrastructure, including fencing, surveillance technology, and border outposts. Enhance joint patrolling and monitoring by Indian and Bangladeshi security forces. Establish more Border Liaison Offices (BLOs) to facilitate real-time communication and coordination. Implement targeted development programs in border areas to address socio-economic disparities and reduce the incentives for illegal migration and smuggling. Promote cross-border trade and economic cooperation to foster mutual prosperity and stability.

Continue high-level dialogues and strategic discussions to build trust and align security policies. Strengthen intelligence-sharing mechanisms to pre-empt and address emerging security threats. Encourage academic and policy research on the socio-political dynamics of the Northeastern region and its cross-border security challenges. Analyse the impact of regional and global geopolitical shifts on the security landscape of the Northeastern states. Engage local communities in border security initiatives and development programs to ensure their active participation and support. Conduct awareness campaigns to educate border populations about the importance of security and cooperation.

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