

Border Issues and Security Challenges in North East India: A Theoretical Study

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Citation: Pegu, R.; (2022). Border Issues and Security Challenges in North East India: A Theoretical Study. *Journal of Intellectuals*, 2(1), 78–85. Retrieved from <https://journals.bahonacollege.edu.in/index.php/joi/article/view/joi2022-2-1-11>

Received: 04 September, 2022
Revised: 08 November, 2022

Accepted: 11 December, 2022
Published: 25 December, 2022

Publisher's Note: JOI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



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Abstract: North East India occupies a strategically important position in the Indian subcontinent due to its geographical location, ethnic diversity, and international borders with neighboring countries. The region shares international boundaries with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, making it highly sensitive from the perspective of national security and regional stability. Over the years, North East India has witnessed several security challenges such as insurgency, illegal migration, border disputes, ethnic conflicts, smuggling, and cross-border terrorism. These issues have significantly affected political stability, economic development, and social harmony in the region. This paper attempts to examine the border issues and security challenges in North East India from a theoretical perspective. It also analyzes the role of the Indian state, neighboring countries, and security agencies in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: North East India, Border Security, Insurgency, Ethnic Conflict, Illegal Migration, National Security

1. Introduction

North East India is one of the most strategically significant regions of India. It consists of eight states—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Sikkim. The region is connected to mainland India through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, commonly known as the “Chicken’s Neck.” North East India shares more than 5,300 kilometers of international border with neighboring countries such as China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal.

The geographical isolation, ethnic diversity, difficult terrain, and porous borders have created complex security challenges in the region. Since independence, the North East has experienced insurgency movements, ethnic

violence, illegal migration, border disputes, and cross-border criminal activities. These challenges not only threaten regional peace but also affect India's national security and foreign relations.

This paper seeks to analyze the border issues and security challenges in North East India using theoretical perspectives from political science and international relations.

Theoretical Framework

The study of border issues and security challenges in North East India can be understood through different theoretical approaches.

Realist Perspective

The realist theory emphasizes national security, territorial integrity, and state sovereignty. According to realism, states prioritize military strength and border protection to ensure survival. India's deployment of military forces and border security agencies in the North East reflects a realist approach toward protecting territorial integrity and countering external threats.

Liberal Perspective

The liberal approach emphasizes cooperation, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement. From this perspective, border disputes and security challenges can be reduced through trade, regional cooperation, connectivity, and dialogue between neighboring countries.

Human Security Approach

The human security perspective focuses on the safety and welfare of individuals rather than merely state security. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, ethnic discrimination, and underdevelopment are considered major causes of insecurity in North East India.

Constructivist Perspective

Constructivism emphasizes identity, culture, ethnicity, and historical experiences. Ethnic conflicts and insurgency movements in North East India are often rooted in identity politics, historical grievances, and demands for autonomy.

Border Issues in North East India

India–China Border Dispute

The border dispute between India and China is one of the most significant security concerns in North East India. China claims large parts of Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet." The absence of a clearly demarcated boundary has led to periodic tensions between the two countries.

China's infrastructural development near the border and occasional military incursions have increased strategic concerns for India. The border dispute also affects India's defense policies and diplomatic relations with China.

India–Bangladesh Border Issues

The border between India and Bangladesh has historically been associated with illegal migration, smuggling, and infiltration. States such as Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura have faced demographic and political challenges due to illegal immigration.

The issue of illegal migration has created social tensions and ethnic conflicts, particularly in Assam. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) debate reflects the political sensitivity of migration-related issues.

India–Myanmar Border

The India–Myanmar border is porous and difficult to monitor because of dense forests and mountainous terrain. Several insurgent groups from North East India have reportedly used border areas as safe havens.

Cross-border movement, arms trafficking, drug smuggling, and militant activities remain major security concerns along this border. The Free Movement Regime (FMR), which allows border communities limited movement across the border, has also generated security debates.

India–Bhutan Border

The India–Bhutan border has generally remained peaceful. However, in the past, insurgent groups from Assam established camps in Bhutanese territory. Bhutan's military operation against these groups in 2003 significantly improved security cooperation between the two countries.

Insurgency in North East India

Insurgency has been one of the most serious security challenges in North East India. Various insurgent groups emerged due to political grievances, ethnic identity issues, demands for autonomy, economic underdevelopment, and perceived neglect by the central government.

Major Insurgent Movements

Naga Insurgency

The Naga insurgency is one of the oldest insurgencies in India. Groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) demanded a separate homeland for Nagas.

ULFA Movement in Assam

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) emerged in Assam with the demand for a sovereign Assam. Economic exploitation, unemployment, and concerns regarding illegal migration contributed to the rise of the movement.

Insurgency in Manipur

Several militant organizations in Manipur have demanded independence or greater autonomy. Ethnic tensions between different communities have further intensified instability.

Bodo Movement

The Bodo movement in Assam demanded a separate Bodoland state. Ethnic violence and political mobilization significantly affected peace and stability in the region.

Insurgency has resulted in violence, displacement, human rights concerns, and militarization of the region.

Ethnic Conflicts and Identity Politics

North East India is home to diverse ethnic, linguistic, and tribal communities. Ethnic identity plays a major role in regional politics and conflicts.

Competition over land, political representation, resources, and cultural recognition has often led to ethnic violence. Conflicts between tribal and non-tribal communities, as well as between different ethnic groups, have created social instability.

Identity-based politics has also encouraged demands for separate states, autonomy councils, and constitutional safeguards.

Illegal Migration and Demographic Changes

Illegal migration, particularly from Bangladesh, remains a controversial issue in North East India. Local communities fear that demographic changes may threaten indigenous identity, language, culture, and political rights.

Migration-related tensions have contributed to social unrest and political movements in Assam and other states. The Assam Movement (1979–1985) was largely centered on the issue of illegal immigration.

The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 attempted to address these concerns, but the issue continues to influence regional politics.

Cross-Border Crime and Security Threats

Drug Trafficking

North East India lies close to the “Golden Triangle,” one of the world’s major drug-producing regions. Drug trafficking through the Myanmar border poses serious security and public health challenges.

Arms Smuggling

Illegal arms trafficking supports insurgent activities and criminal networks in the region.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, especially involving women and children, has emerged as a major concern in border areas.

Smuggling

Smuggling of goods, wildlife products, and counterfeit currency also affects regional security and economic stability.

Role of the Indian Government

The Government of India has adopted several measures to address border and security challenges in North East India.

Military and Security Measures

India has deployed the Army, Assam Rifles, Border Security Force (BSF), and other security agencies to maintain law and order and protect international borders.

Peace Accords

Several peace agreements have been signed with insurgent groups to restore stability.

Examples include:

Mizo Peace Accord (1986)

Bodo Peace Accords

Naga peace negotiations

Developmental Policies

The government has emphasized infrastructure development, connectivity, education, and economic growth to address the root causes of insurgency and underdevelopment.

Act East Policy

India's Act East Policy seeks to improve connectivity and economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through North East India.

Challenges to Peace and Security

Despite government initiatives, several challenges remain:

Porous borders and difficult terrain

Ethnic tensions and identity conflicts

Political instability in neighboring countries

Cross-border insurgent networks

Economic underdevelopment and unemployment

Human rights concerns related to militarization

Weak border infrastructure

These factors continue to complicate the security environment in the region.

2. Conclusion

North East India occupies a strategically vital position in India's national security framework. The region's complex border issues, insurgency movements, ethnic conflicts, illegal migration, and cross-border crimes present significant challenges to peace and stability.

Theoretical perspectives such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and human security provide important insights into understanding these challenges. While military measures remain important for protecting territorial integrity, long-term peace requires political dialogue, economic development, regional cooperation, and protection of cultural identities.

A balanced approach combining security measures with inclusive development and democratic governance is essential for ensuring lasting peace and stability in North East India.

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