

Realism Not Romanticism Should Dictate India's Pakistan Policy

Namrata Goswami

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India has been working on plans of building economic corridors in Northeast India's neighborhood to boost foreign trade and to give the economy the much needed leap forward. Execution of these plans is crucial to achieve the goals of India's Look-East policy.

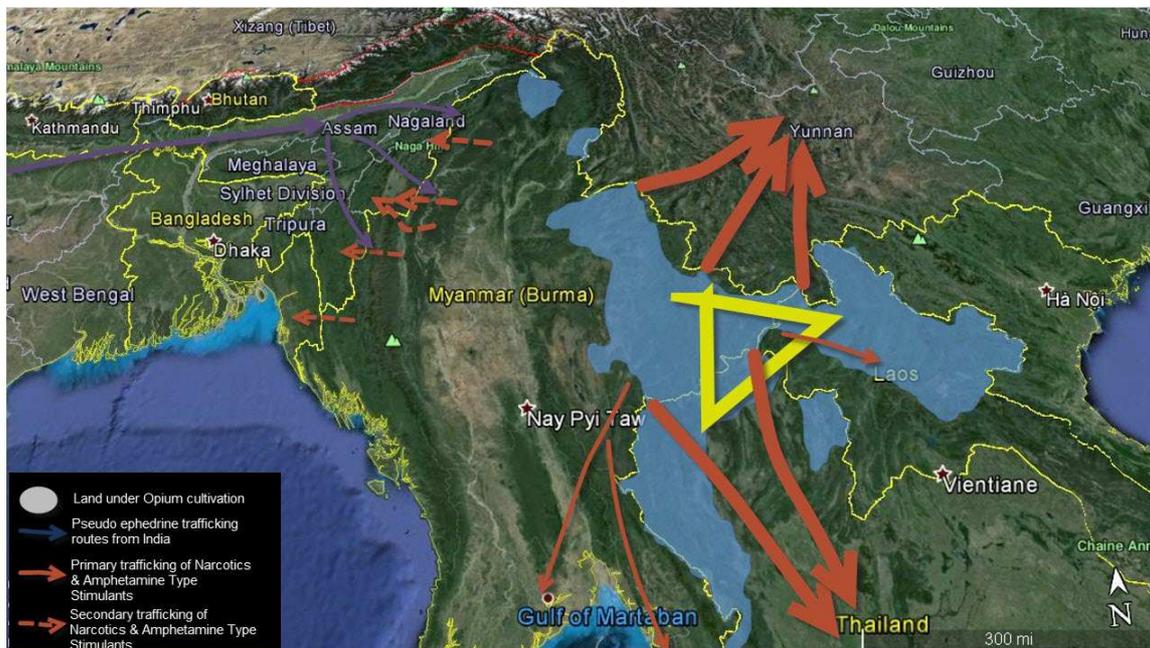
Northeast India can develop, prosper and eventually overcome its troubles by engaging eastern foreign neighbours. Especially with the recent agreement on the Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor blueprint, India can access markets in China's west and southwest, through the Northeastern borders. Yunnan, the neighbouring province in China is the network hub for trade and connectivity with the rest of the country. Equally important for Northeast India is the regional connectivity under the sub-regional and regional cooperation such as ASEAN, SAARC, and the Greater Mekong Sub-region Cooperation (GMS). That said, a word of caution is appropriate to understand the ugly behemoth of narcotics trafficking intertwined with ethnic insurgencies in the neighbouring Golden Triangle. Huge quantities of illicit narcotics can easily ride the new access routes of greater connectivity and can blow up already existing issues of secured human health and wellbeing of society.

India's security strategy for the economic corridors and connectivity will have to entail water tight anti-drugs control measures and mechanisms to snuff out the possibilities of surges in narcotics trafficking that may result from better connectivity and established networks of peoples across the region.

Bordering Myanmar to the east are the four Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. Each state's data from the National AIDS Control Organisation reports show high numbers of HIV-related diseases and volumes of drug trafficking. Narcotics and contraband firearms are regularly trafficked across the unmanned border as the routes of western Myanmar are controlled by India's north-east insurgents. In recent years, Manipur has witnessed huge quantities of contraband high Pseudoephedrine Hydrochloride (PH)-content drugs, manufactured in India, being trafficked into Myanmar for processing narcotics especially heroin. The thriving ethnic insurgencies of Manipur with

their own “tax structure” help to exacerbate the problem. Pseudoephedrine is smuggled from New Delhi to Myanmar and China via Guwahati by conduits based in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram (See Figure I)

Figure I: Flow of Drugs in the Golden Triangle and Northeast India



Source: Namrata Goswami

Traditionally, the Golden Triangle is a region between the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand; a famous region for its opium production. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) latest *Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2013*, opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle went up by 22 per cent in 2013 propelled by a 13 per cent growth in Myanmar. This registered a 26 per cent rise from 2012 in opium cultivation and yield.¹ A decade ago, the Golden Triangle supplied half the world’s heroin, but drug barons backed by ethnic militias in Myanmar have turned to trafficking massive quantities of amphetamines and methamphetamines – “which can be produced cheaply in small, hidden laboratories, without the need for acres of exposed land”² and these narcotics now dominate the Myanmar part of the Triangle. Insurgencies in Myanmar have been funded by narcotics trafficking. Cease-fires with the civilian government of Myanmar have left rebel groups free to continue their manufacturing and smuggling without interference. Since insurgencies based on purely ethnic issues are on the way out, high profits and access to the lucrative Thai and foreign markets now drive narcotics production and trafficking.

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2013” at http://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2013/SEA_Opium_Survey_2013_web.pdf (Accessed on February 05, 2014).

² Ben Doherty, “Drug Smuggling into Thailand Soars Ahead of Burma Elections”, *The Guardian*, June 21, 2010 at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/21/drug-smuggling-thailand-burma-elections> (Accessed on February 04, 2014).

The Myanmar government can do little to counter drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle as traffickers are well organized Chinese syndicates operating from outside Myanmar.³

Myanmar's Wa ethnic group is the largest producer of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS). The United Wa State Army (UWSA) is sustained by narcotics money in addition to arms contraband. Increases in the use of methamphetamine in Thailand have contributed to regional instability and Thailand's National Security Council now recognizes narcotics smuggling as a critical threat to its national security. Thailand accuses Myanmar of unleashing "narcotic aggression" on Thailand and with the stupendous increase of methamphetamine production within Myanmar, drug trafficking into Thailand from Myanmar is on the rise. Ethnic militias like the UWSA and Shan State Army (SSA) control most of the 1800 km Myanmar border with Thailand and corruption within the Thai security forces has abetted a thriving narcotics trade. Within Myanmar, the UWSA has emerged as the largest producer of methamphetamine. Mong Yawn, [the drug base of the UWSA](#) in the Shan state in Myanmar, enjoys direct access to the Thai province of Chiang Mai, emerging as one of the biggest drug boom towns near the Myanmar-Thailand border. Methamphetamine smuggling from Myanmar into Thailand by UWSA amounts to 200 million pills per year. Besides tackling border corruption within its ranks, the Thai military has a dangerous task, challenged as it is by the Shan and Wa armies complicit with narcotics crossing the border.

China's Drug Control Strategy

The former military *junta* in Myanmar had been at war with the ethnic rebel groups of the *Wa* and the *Shans* interspersed with periodic ceasefires. The UWSA had earlier supported the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese military) but later retreated to the northern part of Shan state. The *Tatmadaw* also propped up several ethnic militias as a check against the ceasefire rebels. These various ethnic armed groups struck deals amongst themselves to facilitate the profitable narcotic trade.

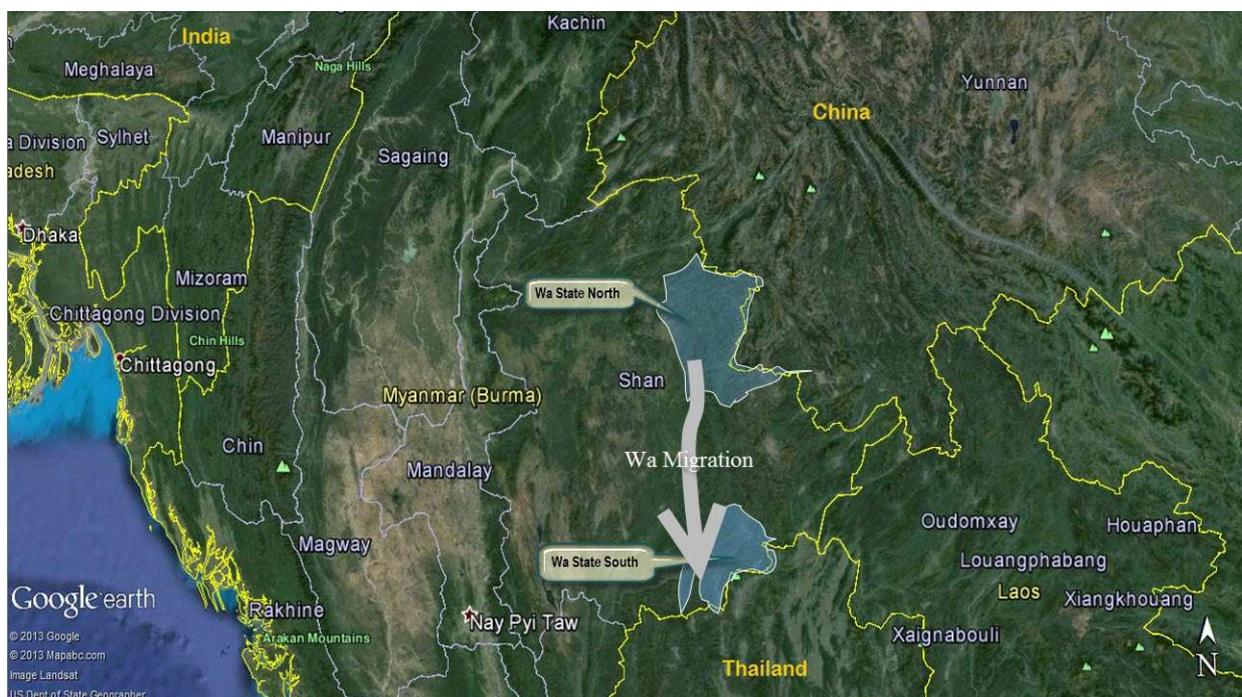
China's Yunnan province has a 1997-km border with Myanmar and narcotics have adversely affected many Chinese border villages. Previously heroin use made Yunnan suffer the highest HIV rate of any Chinese province or autonomous region. Ruili, the border town in Yunnan, suffers from two-thirds of drug users infected with HIV due to sharing contaminated injections. This situation is further aggravated by the presence of guns and a heightened risk of border related violence.

In 2000, taking advantage of the ongoing conflicts in Shan state in Myanmar, China persuaded the ethnic *Wa* to relocate with their drug production units from the Myanmar-China border to the Myanmar-Thailand border (**See Figure II**). The UWSA, aided by the *Tatmadaw*, had wrested the new acquired territory from the control of the SSA of *Khun Sa*,

³ Please see Paul Sarno, "The War on Drugs", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2009, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 223-241 at <http://www.thebestfriend.org/wp-content/uploads/warondrugs.pdf> (Accessed on February 10, 2014).

the opium warlord and ‘King’ of the Golden Triangle. This move reduced drug trafficking into China and at the same time dumped the problem on Thailand. China armed the *Wa* with weapons and supplied money. In return the *Wa* would control the entrance and exit regions of Shan state and ‘help’ the Chinese in constructing roads through the territory giving China the much desired access to the Myanmar coast. The *Tatmadaw* also formed an alliance with the UWSA to first defeat the Shans and second to serve as proxies in fighting the Thai army at the border.

Figure II: Migration of *Wa* from the China-Myanmar Border to the China-Thai Border



Source: Namrata Goswami

However China still suffers narcotics trafficking, with 3.2 tons of ATS seized in the Yunnan province in 2009. China has taken measures in the pharmaceutical industry to deter illegal drug production. The latest seizure of 3.3 tons of crystal methamphetamine in South China, Guangdong province, was made in early 2014.⁴ However, China is far from ensuring that the flow of drugs remains limited, and its own provinces escape its lethal effects.

⁴ “Drugs Seized in Raids on Southern Chinese Villages”, *Reuters*, January 03, 2014 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/03/us-china-drugs-idUSBREA0204M20140103> (Accessed on February 10, 2014).

Implications for Northeast India

Illicit drug trade along the Golden Triangle has serious implications for Northeast India. First, opening up to Southeast Asia carries a double edged sword. On one hand, it promises development and investments. On the other hand, it invites the danger of rapid flow of illicit drugs and arms. Second, without effective drug control mechanisms that guarantee that illicit trade is kept to the minimum, the adverse consequences of illicit drugs on Northeast society could leave long term negative effects. Third, India should establish institutional mechanisms with China, Myanmar and Thailand to counter-illicit trafficking. Finally, there must be a long term Indian strategy to limit drugs trafficking, address the social impact of drug addiction, spread the word about the ill effects of drug abuse in schools, and established efficient rehabilitation centres in the HIV and drug zones in Northeast India. There is perhaps no other way to address the life threatening effects of drug addiction and HIV, currently destroying youths in Northeast India especially Manipur.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.