

Crossing Lines

Drugs, Insurgency and Disorder in the Indo-Myanmar Borderlands

*Manashi Parashar**

The intensification of drug trafficking across the Indo-Myanmar border presents a significant challenge to both political and socio-economic stability in the region. This illicit trade not only exacerbates insurgent activities in Northeast India but also poses a serious threat to the country's internal security. The porous and inadequately monitored border facilitates the movement of narcotics, creating a permissive environment for transnational criminal networks.¹ These vulnerabilities have been further compounded by Myanmar's enduring political instability following the 2021 military coup, elevating the issue to a matter of national security.² Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) of Myanmar operating along the border have increasingly engaged in drug trafficking as a means of financing their campaigns against the junta regime.³ Concurrently insurgent groups in Northeast India have leveraged proceeds from the opium trade to procure arms and explosives, thereby deepening the cycle of violence and contributing to a broader security crisis within the region.⁴ These revenues are used to procure arms, ammunition and explosives, often sourced through transnational networks that extend into Myanmar, China and Southeast Asia.⁵ The porous Indo-Myanmar border facilitates the smuggling of drugs and weapons, creating a persistent security dilemma for

* Ms Manashi Parashar is an Assistant Professor at the Assam Don Bosco University, and Research Scholar at Cotton University, Assam, India.

Indian forces like the Assam Rifles who are guarding our Indo-Myanmar border. The entanglement of narcotics trafficking with insurgency not only sustains armed movements but also undermines local governance, weakens rule of law and fuels corruption which is evident in the case of Northeastern states. This convergence of drug trade and insurgency has been recognised as a critical non-traditional security threat in the region.⁶

India's geographical proximity to the 'Golden Triangle' has positioned it as both a transit corridor and a destination for various illicit drug trafficking networks. The India–Myanmar border, characterised by its high porosity and inadequate security infrastructure, remains particularly vulnerable to the activities of insurgent groups, drugs and arms traffickers, and other transnational criminal actors. Thus, it is crucial to understand and trace the patterns of drug trafficking in the aftermath of the military junta's resurgence in Myanmar. It becomes imperative for India to not only strengthen its border management strategies but also to foster deeper bilateral cooperation with Myanmar in order to effectively address these evolving security challenges.⁷

MILITARY COUP OF 2021 IN MYANMAR AND NARCO-TRAFFICKING

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has significantly deteriorated the country's political landscape, intensifying tensions between the ruling Junta and various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). The post-coup period has been marked by violent crackdowns, widespread armed resistance and severe economic disruption. This political instability is further compounded by Myanmar's status as the largest drug producing hub in Southeast Asia.⁸ As a core component of the 'Golden Triangle'—a region encompassing Myanmar, Laos and Thailand known for its extensive opium cultivation and narcotics trafficking—Myanmar plays a pivotal role in the regional drug trade. These overlapping crises have amplified drug trafficking activities, particularly along the Indo-Myanmar border, which remains highly susceptible due to its porous nature and limited security infrastructure.⁹

The aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 military coup has led to a significant escalation in opium cultivation, thereby exacerbating drug trafficking across the region. According to a report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), rural farmers in remote areas of Myanmar have turned to opium cultivation as a means of livelihood after the military, security and government disruptions that followed the military takeover on 1 February 2021.¹⁰

Socio-economic pressures, such as the relatively high cost of cultivating conventional cash crops compared to poppy have further incentivised this shift.¹¹ Notably, revenue from poppy cultivation has reached approximately US\$ 355 per kilogram, making it significantly more profitable than other agricultural options. In 2023 alone, Myanmar exported an estimated 154 tonnes of heroin, valued at up to US\$ 2.2 billion.¹² Compounding this issue, insurgent groups like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Arakan Army (AA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA) have reportedly played a substantial role in drug trafficking. The proceeds from opium production are used to finance their operations, which includes procurement of arms, explosives and recruitment of combatants—thus creating a direct nexus between narcotics trade and insurgency.¹³

BORDERLAND VULNERABILITIES: HOW MYANMAR'S POLITICAL INSTABILITY FUELS NARCOTICS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The fallout of Myanmar's political upheaval, particularly since the 2021 military coup, has created fertile ground for drug trafficking networks to expand their operations across the India–Myanmar border. The region's porous and insufficiently monitored frontier has enabled a steady flow of narcotics, especially heroin into India.¹⁴ This security gap is further widened by deeply rooted trans-border ethnic linkages and the presence of organised criminal syndicates, which exploit legitimate border trade routes, such as the one at Moreh for their illicit activities.¹⁵

The Junta's resurgence has coincided with a sharp rise in smuggling, not only of opium and heroin but increasingly amphetamine-type-stimulants (ATS), into India's northeastern states.¹⁶ As International Crisis Group Analyst, Richard Horsey, observed, the military takeover has proven advantageous for drug cartels, allowing criminal groups to strengthen their foothold and boost synthetic drug production amidst the prevailing chaos.¹⁷

The India–Myanmar border, spanning approximately 1,643 kilometres adjoins the northeastern states of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁸ The rugged, mountainous terrain and porous borders offer ideal conditions for traffickers to operate with minimal detection. These illicit networks are not only smuggling narcotics but also channelising a portion of their profits to local insurgent groups, who use the funds to procure arms and explosives, thereby sustaining separatist movements in the region. The former Assam Director General of Police, Mukul Sahay, has affirmed

that illegal trade pertaining to drugs, counterfeit currency and contraband tobacco substantially contributes to the financing of insurgent organisations in the Northeast. He emphasised that traffickers often pay ‘protection money’ to these groups in exchange for operational security, further entrenching the link between organised crime and militancy. This convergence of narco-financing and insurgency presents a direct challenge to both state sovereignty and internal security in India’s border regions.¹⁹

Several insurgent organisations, including the Zomi Revolutionary Army, Chin Kuki Liberation Army, United Tribal Liberation Army of Manipur and United Liberation Front of Assam, are known to facilitate trafficking by taxing smugglers or offering them safe passage through controlled territories. In some cases, such as the Kangleipak Communist Party of Manipur, involvement in the drug trade is more direct, driven by urgent financial needs. A striking example of this nexus occurred on 16 October 2023 when a Kuki militant leader in Manipur was apprehended for trafficking narcotics—underscoring the persistent overlap between drug traffickers and insurgent activities in the region.²⁰ In 2023, acting on a specific intelligence regarding insurgency activity in Phaitol village of Tamenglong district, approximately 145 kilometres from Imphal, a unit of the 39 Assam Rifles conducted an operation early in the morning. During the operation, the forces apprehended an individual identified as Singson and seized approximately 124 grams of a substance suspected to be heroin (commonly referred to as ‘brown sugar’), which had been concealed in ten soap cases. The accused is reportedly affiliated with the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and the United Tribal Liberation Army (UTLA) agreement with the Government of India and the state government. This agreement encompasses around 25 Kuki insurgent groups operating primarily in the hill regions of Manipur adjacent to Myanmar and Mizoram borders.²¹ The continued entanglement of insurgency and the narcotics economy poses a complex and evolving threat to governance and rule of law in India’s Northeast.

The escalating drug trade along the Indo-Myanmar border has precipitated a significant public health crisis in Northeast India, particularly among the younger generation. The influx of narcotics such as heroin (locally known as ‘Number 4’), methamphetamine (‘ice’ or ‘crystal meth’) and yaba pills has led to increased substance abuse in both border states like Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland and non-bordering states such as Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. A nation-wide study revealed the prevalence of substance abuse among individuals aged 10–24 years was 32.8 per cent, with a median initiation age of 18 years.²²

Recent data gives a clear idea of the severity of the situation. Between April 2024 and January 2025, Mizoram witnessed 46 drug-related deaths and significant seizures, including 34.15 kg of heroin and 34.18 kg of methamphetamine.²³ The widespread availability and consumption of these substances have not only strained the region's healthcare infrastructure but also exacerbated social challenges, including increased rates of addiction and associated health complications. The intertwining of drugs trafficking with regional insurgencies further complicates efforts to address this multifaceted crisis.

STATE RESPONSES TO COUNTER NARCO-TRAFFICKING

At the state level, several northeastern states have adopted a range of strategies to counter the surging drug trafficking crisis emanating from across the Indo-Myanmar border. A commonly employed measure involves intensified law enforcement operations, including raids and seizures. Manipur's flagship counter-narcotics initiative, the 'War on Drugs', has achieved notable progress, with authorities reporting the seizure of narcotics valued at approximately Rs 142 crore during 2022–2023. In addition, a substantial number of arrests were made under provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, reflecting intensified enforcement efforts across the state. Similarly, Mizoram in coordination with central agencies like the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and the Assam Rifles, reported narcotic seizures worth Rs 355 crore between April 2024 and January 2025.²⁴

Manipur has started complementary measures such as increased border surveillance, the eradication of illicit poppy plantations and the establishment of de-addiction and rehabilitation centres that have further augmented these enforcement strategies. The state of Assam has adopted a comprehensive three-pronged framework that integrates enforcement, rehabilitation and public awareness.²⁵

Technological upgrades have been instrumental in bolstering surveillance capabilities. Long-range reconnaissance and battlefield surveillance radars have been deployed across parts of the 1,642-kilometer-long Indo-Myanmar border.²⁶ Vulnerability mapping, carried out periodically, enables authorities to identify high-risk areas and strategically deploy electronic monitoring equipment.²⁷

The Government of India has recently taken steps to curtail the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Indo-Myanmar border, citing

increasing security concerns related to cross-border narcotics trafficking and insurgency activity. However, this policy shift has not been well-received by communities residing in the border regions. In particular, residents of Indo-Myanmar border villages such as Longwa and Pangsha have expressed apprehension and resistance towards the newly implemented regulations. These sentiments stem not only from the practical disruptions to daily life but also deeper cultural and ethnic ties that link them to communities across the Myanmar border. The imposition of stricter measures—including biometric data collection at crossing points—has generated unease, as it is perceived to undermine long-standing trans-border kingship networks. At the Integrated Check Post near the decommissioned International Trade Centre (ITC) in Dan, Noklal District of Nagaland, such protocols have been operational under the supervision of the 14th Assam Rifles since January 2025. Interviews conducted by *The Morung Express* underscore the villagers' concerns that these developments threaten to sever socio-cultural bonds that have historically defied the formal boundaries of the nation-state.²⁸ The imposition of stricter border controls under the guise of national security has, in many cases, alienated local populations, whose daily lives and cultural ties transcend the artificial boundaries of the state.²⁹ Local populations, while enduring the socio-economic fallout of these overlapping threats of narco-insurgency, have adopted a range of coping mechanisms. In some areas, traditional community-based surveillance systems—village councils and local youth groups—have taken on informal policing roles to deter illicit activities. For instance, in the Longwa village, the Longwa Students Union keeps strict vigilance. However, the pervasive influence of armed groups and drug cartels often undermines these grassroots efforts, creating an environment of fear and complicity.³⁰

EFFECTIVE BORDER MANAGEMENT

The Government of India has tasked the Assam Rifles (AR), a paramilitary force which ensures border security, with conducting counter-insurgency operations, and maintaining law and order particularly in the northeastern part of Indo-Myanmar border. In an incident, on 14 May 2025, Assam Rifles personnel killed 10 individuals identified as 'armed cadres' near the India–Myanmar border in Manipur who were trying to disrupt the ongoing border fencing activities. These armed cadres were reportedly affiliated with the Myanmar-based People's Defence Force (PDF)—the military wing of the National Unity Government (NUG), which operates as a government-

in-exile. They crossed the border illegally and tried to interfere with the Border Roads Task Force (BRTF) personnel involved in the fencing project.³¹

The Indian government, in coordination with the state governments and union territories, has taken multiple initiatives to strengthen the NCB and other enforcement bodies for more effective implementation of the NDPS Act. There has also been an establishment of a four-tier Narco Coordination Centre (NCORD) mechanism which is designed to enhance coordination among central and state drug enforcement agencies. There is also a centralised NCORD portal for streamlining information related to drug law enforcement. Even northeastern states as per Government of India reports have formed a dedicated Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF), led by a senior police officer (of Additional Director General or Inspector General rank) to serve as the state-level NCORD secretariat, and ensure the implementation of NCORD decisions. Furthermore, the central government has constituted a Joint Coordination Committee (JCC), chaired by the Director General of the NCB, to oversee investigations related to major drug seizures.³²

Additionally, India's border guarding forces, including the Border Security Force (BSF), Assam Rifles and Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), have been granted powers under the NDPS Act, 1985, to conduct searches, seizures and arrests in cases of drug trafficking across international borders, like the Indo-Myanmar border.³³

In response to persistent security challenges along the Indo-Myanmar border, the Government of India has adopted a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy aimed at enhancing border management in the North Eastern Region (NER). This strategy encompasses physical infrastructure development, including the construction of border fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border, floodlighting of additional 612 km, i.e., erection of poles, laying of cables, fitting of fixtures and energisation and all-weather roads to improve accessibility and security in the remote areas. Technological interventions, such as the deployment of advanced surveillance systems and integrated border monitoring technologies, have also been prioritised to bolster situational awareness and early threat detection. Parallel to these security measures, the government continues to implement developmental initiatives like the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) and the Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP), which aim to address the socio-economic marginalisation of borderland communities and mitigate the appeal of cross-border illicit networks. Moreover, efforts to strengthen intelligence coordination and foster cross-border collaboration with neighbouring states,

particularly Myanmar, constitute vital components of this evolving border security framework.³⁴

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, addressing the complex challenge of narco-insurgency and cross-border instability along the Indo-Myanmar frontier requires India to move beyond traditional, security-centric paradigms. While military vigilance, border fortification and bilateral engagement remain essential components of national security, they must be complemented by non-traditional strategies that are people-centric, development-oriented and culturally sensitive. A critical shortcoming in the current approach is its over-reliance on coercive mechanisms, which often alienate local communities and fail to account for the socio-economic drivers of insecurity. Instead, India must adopt a bottom-up model that integrates alternative development schemes, including sustainable agriculture, skill development and micro-enterprise programmes, particularly in vulnerable border villages. There is already a sense of alienation in these border villages from the time of independence, and even though the government has introduced various schemes like Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Saubhagya Scheme (Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana), Digital India and BharatNet, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin, etc., the benefits have not reached remote villages in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands.

Furthermore, India should invest in cross-border environmental cooperation, disaster preparedness and public health and education infrastructure as part of a broader non-traditional security agenda. Such efforts would not only mitigate transnational threats but also build trust and resilience in the region. Engaging with ethnic groups and community leaders across the border can also facilitate more inclusive diplomacy, fostering local-level peacebuilding and curbing the influence of illicit networks. By expanding the definition of security to include human security—addressing structural inequalities, dislocation and disenfranchisement—India can advance a more sustainable and ethical policy posture. Ultimately, a flexible, multi-dimensional strategy grounded in non-traditional security frameworks will be key to ensuring both stability and human well-being in India's northeastern borderlands.

NOTES

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