MP-IDSA Monograph Series
No. 109 November 2026

PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN INDIA

SOURCES, IMPACT AND RESPONSE

PUSHPITA DAS

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DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
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ISBN: 978-81-687924-3-2

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First Published: November 2026

Price: Rs. 325/-

Published by: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg, Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010
Tel. (91-11) 2671-7983
Website: http://www.idsa.in

Layout & Cover by: Geeta Kumari

Printed at: Pentagon Press LLP
206, Peacock Lane, Shahpur Jat
New Delhi-110049
Tel. (91-11) 26491568, 26490600
Fax: (91-11) 26490600
email: rajan@pentagonpress.in
website: http://www.pentagonpress.in

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Introduction

The widespread availability and illicit circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) pose a multifaceted and evolving challenge to national security worldwide. Their portability, durability and ease of concealment make them the weapons of choice for terrorists, insurgent groups and criminal networks. The illicit trade in SALW has been recognised by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a major threat to international peace and security due to its role in causing large-scale loss of life, prolonging conflicts and destabilising societies.[1] By increasing the intensity and duration of violence, the availability of such weapons encourages militancy rather than a peaceful resolution of unsettled differences.[2] Globally, SALW proliferation is widely regarded as a major driver of conflict, terrorism and organised crime, with significant humanitarian and developmental consequences.[3]

In India, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons is driven by three interconnected sources of supply: cross-border trafficking, diversion of legally produced or state-controlled weapons and ammunition, and illicit domestic manufacture. While cross-border trafficking provides a major external source of illicit weapons, domestic

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1 *General and Complete Disarmament: Small Arms, Resolution 50/70, A/RES/50/70*, United Nations General Assembly, December 12, 1995, p. 2, at https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/50/70.

2 *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms* A/52/298, United Nations General Assembly, August 27, 1997, p. 2, at https://docs.un.org/en/A/52/298.

3 Suneel Kumar, "Small Arms and Light Weapons: A Global Threat to Human Security and Development", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, LXIX (4), October–December, 2008, pp. 794-798

proliferation occurs through both the diversion of legally produced or officially held firearms and ammunition and the clandestine manufacture of firearms. In recent years, a series of news reports of arms being smuggled into the country through the India–Pakistan and India–Myanmar borders has renewed attention to the threat of SALW for India's internal security. The recovery of assault rifles, pistols, grenades and other military-grade weapons dropped by drones along the Punjab border, as well as repeated interceptions of arms consignments intended for militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), have highlighted the persistence yet evolving nature of cross-border arms-smuggling networks that continue to sustain militant violence. One manifestation of this evolving trend is the increasing use of low-cost commercial drones, which enable contactless cross-border delivery, reduce operational risk for handlers and allow repeated attempts through changing drop locations and timings.[4]

While the western border reflects the technological adaptation of trafficking networks, the movement of illicit weapons into India's north-eastern region continues to follow more traditional routes through the porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. India's Northeast has long experienced illicit arms inflows through the Myanmar and Bangladesh corridors, supported by difficult terrain, poorly guarded borders, transnational insurgent linkages and proximity to Southeast Asian arms markets. The scale and organisation of such networks were clearly revealed in the 2004 Chittagong arms haul, one of the largest seizures in South Asia, in which thousands of weapons destined for insurgent groups in India were intercepted.[5] The ready availability of

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[4] Manjeet Negi, "Exclusive: Pak shifts tactics, turns drone launchpad for narcotics, arms smuggling into India", *India Today*, New Delhi, January 23, 2026, at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistani-ditches-old-routes-drone-narcotics-arms-smuggling-india-launchpad-2856949-2026-01-23.

[5] Sahidul Hasan Khokom, "Trucks of arms seized at Chittagong in 2004 meant for ULFA: India's ex-intel officer", *India Today*, Dhaka, February 23, 2023, at https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/bangladesh-defense-intelligence-agency-india-bnp-awami-league-major-general-gaganjit-singh-arms-consignment-2338411-2023-02-23.

small arms has enabled insurgent groups in the Northeast to sustain their operations for decades, thereby prolonging conflict and instability in the region. The instability following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar has further increased concerns regarding the spillover of arms into Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. During the recent violence in Manipur, intelligence and media reports suggest that, alongside the large-scale looting of state armouries, cross-border smuggling networks may have contributed to the circulation of additional weapons, thereby exacerbating the already fraught situation.[6]

India's small arms problem is not limited to cross-border smuggling but is also linked to domestic sources. These domestic sources include both legally authorised production and illicit manufacturing networks. Firearms in India are manufactured in authorised, licensed facilities to meet the requirements of the armed forces, police and authorised civilian users. However, there are concerns about the diversion and pilferage of weapons and ammunition from these legal stocks during production, storage, transport or operational use. Weak inventory control and inadequate security can allow such weapons to enter illegal markets.[7] Even small leakages are significant, as these weapons are of high quality and are attractive to criminal and militant groups.

Alongside these risks, a network of illegal manufacturing units operating through small, dispersed workshops in several states produces large numbers of country-made firearms, creating a steady supply for insurgent and criminal groups. These weapons are widely used in

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[6] Prawesh Lama, "In Manipur conflict, rise in Myanmar-made weapons", *Hindustan Times*, December 23, 2024, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-manipur-conflict-rise-in-myanmar-made-weapons-101734893789325.html. TOI News Desk, "Arms from Myanmar: Smuggling racket in Manipur busted; 4 held as probe intensifies", *The Times of India*, July 6, 2025, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/arms-from-myanmar-smuggling-racket-in-manipur-busted-4-held-as-probe-intensifies/articleshow/122280149.cms.

[7] Ravinder Pal Singh, "An Ideal Arms Trade Treaty from India's Perspective", *IDSA Policy Brief*, July 27, 2012, at https://idsa.in/publisher/policybrief/an-ideal-arms-trade-treaty-from-indias-perspective.

insurgency, organised crime, contract killings, political intimidation and interpersonal violence, resulting in persistent violent crime across various states.[8] According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), India recorded 27, 049 murder cases in 2024,[9] with firearms accounting for roughly 12–14 per cent of total killings. While the NCRB does not classify murder weapons by licence status, data from seizures under the Arms Act indicate widespread illegal possession. With 63,564 cases registered and 71,261weapons seized in 2024, 69,724 arms were categorised as unlicensed/improvised/crude/country-made.[10] These figures suggest that illicit firearms constitute a significant share of weapons circulating in criminal activity.

The nexus between illegal arms syndicates and terrorist groups has posed a serious threat to India's internal security.[11] The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) Report notes that terrorist groups increasingly depend on organised criminal networks for financing, weapons, logistics, forged documents, money laundering and access to trafficking routes. In return, criminal syndicates benefit from the protection, operational expertise and coercive power of terrorists, with such ties ranging from temporary collaboration to long-term partnerships or hybrid crime–terror organisations.[12] Such

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8 Nikhil Sharma, "How illegal factories in MP, UP fuel gun trade & culture in NCR", *The Times of India*, Gurgaon, July 21, 2025, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/how-illegal-factories-in-mp-up-fuel-gun-trade-culture-in-ncr/articleshow/122801396.cms.

9 *Crime in India 2024. Vol. I*, National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi, 2024, p. 228.

10 *Crime in India 2024. Vol. III*, National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi, 2024, p. 1477.

11 *National Counter-Terrorism Policy & Strategy*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, p. 4, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/PRAHAAREng_23022026.pdf.

12 "The Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America", *United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute*, June 2024, p.13, at https://unicri.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/The%20Nexus%20between%20Transnational%20Organized%20Crime%20and%20Terrorism%20in%20Latin%20America.pdf.

linkages were evident in a recent case investigated by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), where a Pakistan-backed network smuggled arms, ammunition and heroin into India through drone drops along the border and distributed them across Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab using encrypted communication and local operatives. Investigations also revealed a close connection between arms suppliers and drug traffickers, aimed at expanding criminal networks and exploiting youth through narcotics.[13] Similarly, in a 2024 Bihar case, the agency charge-sheeted an accused involved in procuring and smuggling prohibited weapons, including AK-47 rifles, for supply to Maoist groups and criminal networks.[14]

Thus, the significance of SALW proliferation in India lies in sustaining chronic, low-intensity violence across multiple regions. On one hand, the cross-border inflows of military-grade weapons continue to play a critical role in enabling militant and insurgent groups to maintain operational capabilities. On the other hand, the availability of cheap, illegally manufactured or trafficked firearms has enabled criminal networks to expand their activities, carry out contract killings, enforce extortion and assert local dominance through armed coercion. The overlap between these two spheres has created a growing nexus in which arms traffickers, organised crime groups and extremist or insurgent elements share supply chains, logistics and distribution networks. While these two domains may operate separately, over time, they have established mutually beneficial connections, thus exacerbating the internal security scenario of the country.

Against this backdrop, this monograph argues that India's small arms challenge is best understood as a layered internal security problem shaped by the interaction of three distinct but reinforcing dynamics—

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[13] "Mastermind in Pak-Linked Inter-State Arms & Narcotics Trafficking Case Chargesheeted by NIA", *National Investigation Agency*, New Delhi, November, 14, 2025, at https://nia.gov.in/secure-pdf/view/82d64b7e5addf1cd385f86eb38cebf0c.

[14] "NIA Chargesheets 5th Key Accused in 2024 Bihar AK-47 Rifle Seizure Case", *National Investigation Agency*, New Delhi, February 20, 2026, at https://nia.gov.in/secure-pdf/view/99ee59886f99a701fd4e577b9503bf3f.

cross-border trafficking systems that supply weapons to insurgent, militant and ethnic armed groups in peripheral regions, a domestic illicit manufacturing and distribution network that sustains criminal and localised violence, and the diversion and leakage of legally produced and state-controlled firearms from legitimate channels into illicit markets. The cumulative effect of these processes does not result in an acute national crisis, but it persistently erodes public security, institutional effectiveness, and state authority in high-risk areas.

The study attempts to address three broad questions. First, what are the major sources and supply routes of illicit small arms in India, and how do domestic production networks interact with cross-border trafficking systems? Second, how does the availability of SALW influence patterns of violence across different regions and security contexts? Third, does the available evidence support the characterisation of SALW proliferation as a major national security threat, or should it be understood primarily as a chronic governance challenge?

Addressing these questions requires first clarifying the concept of SALW and the types of weapons that fall within this category.

SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS: DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Small Arms and Light Weapons refer to a class of conventional weapons designed for use by individuals or small groups. According to the definition provided by the United Nations Panel of Governmental Experts, small arms are weapons intended for personal use such as pistols, revolvers, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, while light weapons are designed to be operated by a small crew and include heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-tank weapons, portable anti-aircraft systems and mortars of less than 100 mm calibre.[15] These weapons are widely used by armed forces as well as law-enforcement agencies all over the world as they serve several purposes, including

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[15] *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms* A/52/298, n. 2, pp. 11–12.

self-defence, close-range combat and both direct and indirect fire. Certain light weapons can also be used to engage armoured vehicles or aircraft at relatively short distances.[16]

Several characteristics make SALW particularly significant in modern conflicts. First, these weapons are portable and easy to handle. They can be carried by an individual soldier or transported using pack animals or light vehicles, allowing them to be used effectively in difficult terrain such as mountains, forests and densely populated urban areas.[17] When used indiscriminately, they can cause significant casualties among civilian populations. Second, many small arms require very little maintenance and logistical support, which make them suitable for long and sustained operations. Third, their small size allows them to be easily concealed and transported, making them useful for covert activities and illegal trafficking. Fourth, the small firearms and other light weapons require relatively little training, and an individual combatant can typically learn to operate them within a few hours or days.[18] Last but not least, these weapons are less complex and much cheaper than major conventional weapons, which means they can be acquired not only by states but also by insurgent groups, terrorists and criminal networks.[19]

An important dimension of the SALW problem relates to the availability of ammunition and explosives. Ammunition is an essential component of SALW, since a firearm becomes ineffective without a regular supply of compatible ammunition. The availability of ammunition, therefore, represents an independent factor that sustains armed violence. In addition, the use of improvised explosive devices

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16 Ibid.

17 Michael Klare, "An Overview of the Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons", in Jayantha Dhanapala, Mitsuro Donowaki, Swadesh Rana and Lora Lumpe (eds.), *Small Arms Control: Old Weapons, New Issues*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, p. 4.

18 Ibid.

19 *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms* A/52/298, n. 2, pp. 12–13.

(IEDs) has further intensified conflicts and caused large-scale destruction and casualties. Even relatively small quantities of explosives used by terrorist and insurgent groups had caused devastating effect in many parts of the world. The illicit trafficking of ammunition and explosives, thus, compounds the impact of small arms proliferation by ensuring that such weapons remain operational over long periods.[20]

The significance of the proliferation of SALW can be gauged by the fact that, in recent decades, these weapons have contributed to the increased incidence and intensity of ethnic and internal conflicts. It is argued that SALW were responsible for most of the casualties in conflicts after 1945, and it is estimated that the civilian population suffers far more casualties than the fighting forces in these wars.[21] Perceptible developments in the proliferation of light weapons explain the growing significance of these weapons. In this context, Michael Klare identified four important trends. First, the SALW are becoming increasingly sophisticated and lethal. For example, a modern assault rifle, which is a light and selective-fire weapon, can fire 600–900 rounds per minute. Similarly, antipersonnel landmines have been made smaller and made of plastic, making them harder to detect using conventional metal detectors. Many countries have also embarked upon intensive research to develop lighter, more accurate and much deadlier weapons.[22]

Second, arms-manufacturing technology has proliferated to more countries now. Earlier, a handful of industrialised nations manufactured SALW, but, over time, more than 50 countries, including Israel, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey, have started producing these weapons. The enormity of the problem is shown by the fact that 5 million to 7 million Belgian FAL (Fusil Automatique Léger) assault rifles are produced in 15

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20 Ibid, p. 13.

21 Peter Lock, "Armed Conflicts and Small Arms Proliferation: Refocusing the Research Agenda", *Policy Sciences*, 30(3), August, 1997, p. 117.

22 Michael Klare, "An Overview of the Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons", n. 17, p. 6.

countries; 35 million to 50 million Soviet/Russian AK assault rifles are manufactured by Soviet/Russian factories and licensees; 7 million German Heckler & Koch G3 assault rifles are made in 18 countries; 8 million US M-16 rifles are produced in seven countries; and 6 million Chinese-made AK-type assault rifles are made in China.[23] Initially, these countries aimed to meet the domestic requirements of weapons and reduce foreign dependency; however, gradually, they started exporting these weapons to other countries around the world. For example, India has exported rifles, pistols, ammunition and small military equipment, supplied mainly to developing countries in Asia, Africa, and West Asia.[24] Proliferation of small arms production is making it easier for potential belligerents to acquire these weapons and sustain armed conflicts.

Third, Cold War stockpiles were distributed to less affluent nations and even to insurgent groups. During the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Warsaw Pact countries had armed their militaries with surplus weapons, aiming for massive land, air and sea superiority. However, with the end of the Cold War, these countries decided to dispose of their stockpile by selling it to other developing nations. These transfers happened from one government to another government, as well as through legal sales by private commercial firms in one country to government agencies or private firms in another country.[25] Besides, clandestine transfer of these stockpiles also happened when the government of a country, motivated by political, ideological, religious, economic or irredentist considerations, aided insurgent groups operating in another country. The aiding of anti-Sandinista *Contras* by the US in Nicaragua, Pakistan aiding Kashmiri separatists in India and

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[23] Virginia Hart Ezell, "Small Arms Proliferation Remains Global Dilemma", *National Defense*, January 1995, pp. 26–27.

[24] Archana Rao, "India's Defense Manufacturing Sector: Policy Support, Top Exports, Key Firms", *India Briefing*, January 27, 2025, at https://www.india-briefing.com/news/indias-defense-manufacturing-sector-policy-support-top-exports-key-firms-35946.html/.

[25] Michael T. Klare, "The Global Trade in Light Weapons and the International System in the Post Cold War Era", n. 17, p. 34.

Iran aiding Kurdish separatists in Turkey are some of the examples. Even today, external involvement by states pursuing political or regional objectives continues to influence conflicts in certain areas.

Fourth, the illegal and clandestine trade in light weapons has expanded significantly over the years. A large number of weapons from Cold War stockpiles have also entered the black market and are now circulated through illicit trafficking networks. These arms dealers frequently supply weapons to insurgent groups, separatist movements, ethnic militias and criminal organisations that cannot obtain weapons through legal commercial channels.[26] The widespread circulation of these weapons has been further reinforced by the rise of ethnic, tribal, and religious conflicts in many parts of the world. In addition, terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime have contributed to the continued demand and circulation of small arms and explosives. Where states are unable to maintain effective control over security or provide adequate protection to citizens, armed violence and criminal activity tend to increase, which in turn raises the demand for weapons. In post-conflict societies, weak governance and the failure to properly reintegrate former combatants into civilian life can also lead to their involvement in crime and renewed armed violence.[27]

In sum, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has emerged as a significant challenge to international peace and security by sustaining armed conflicts, terrorism and organised crime across diverse regions. While the consequences of their proliferation are widely recognised, understanding the sources through which these weapons enter conflict zones is equally important for designing effective counter-proliferation measures. In the Indian context, this requires an examination of the regional and transnational supply networks that have sustained the flow

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[26] Ibid, pp. 8–9.

[27] Andrea González Peña and Han Dorussen, "The Reintegration of Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence: An Analysis of Municipal Crime Levels in Colombia," *Conflict Management and Peace Science,* 38(3), 2021, pp. 316–337.

of illicit weapons into the country. The sources of illicit small arms and light weapons in India are varied and reflect the interaction of both external and domestic supply mechanisms.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this monograph lies primarily in its synthesis of the diverse and often separately examined dimensions of India's small arms and light weapons problem. Existing studies have examined cross-border arms trafficking, the role of illicit weapons in insurgencies, domestic illegal firearms manufacture and the diversion of weapons from legal and state-controlled sources, often within particular regions or conflicts. This monograph brings these strands together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different sources of arms supply interact and reinforce one another. By examining historical patterns alongside recent developments, including the changing methods of cross-border smuggling, the proliferation of illicit firearms and continuing efforts to curb domestic manufacturing and diversion, the monograph connects developments that are often studied separately. Its contribution, therefore, is not simply the presentation of new individual cases, but the consolidation of dispersed evidence into an integrated account of the sources, circulation and security implications of illicit SALW in India. This synthesis also provides the basis for identifying common policy responses to a problem that is sustained through multiple and interconnected supply channels.

Outline of the Monograph

The monograph is organised into four chapters. The first chapter examines cross-border arms trafficking networks in Northeast India, with particular attention to the India–Myanmar and India–Bangladesh Borders and analyses the routes, networks and changing methods through which illicit arms enter the country. The second chapter analyses the trafficking networks in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir. The third chapter analyses as well as the domestic sources of illicit firearms, examining both illegal manufacturing and the circulation of firearms within the country. It also examines the diversion of arms and ammunition from state-controlled and other legal sources. The fourth chapter assesses the impact of SALW proliferation on India's internal

security, focusing on its role in sustaining insurgency, militancy, ethnic and communal violence, and organised criminal activity. The fifth chapter examines India's legal and institutional response to the problem. The monograph concludes by providing a few recommendations that could help address the challenges associated with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and strengthen India's efforts to prevent their illicit circulation.

Chapter I

Cross-border Arms Trafficking in Northeast India

The emergence and persistence of insurgencies in Northeast India created the initial and most enduring conditions for the cross-border flow of illicit small arms and light weapons into the region. While insurgent movements depend on multiple factors such as funding, organisational support, recruitment and infrastructure, the availability of weapons and ammunition remains central to their survival and operational effectiveness. The capacity of a militant group to procure and sustain a steady supply of arms is critical not only for maintaining military strength and challenging state authority, but also for attracting attention, mobilising support and recruiting new members. In this context, insurgent groups in the Northeast have demonstrated a notable ability to access weapons from diverse external sources. This has been facilitated by a combination of structural and geographic factors, including rugged terrain, porous international borders and limited state presence in border areas. Together, these conditions have enabled such groups to establish cross-border linkages with external actors and integrate into transnational networks for arms procurement.

In the initial phase of the Naga insurgency, the weapons available to the Naga insurgents consisted of arms left behind by the British Army in the Naga Hills after the defeat of Japanese forces in the Battle of Kohima. Angami Zapu Phizo, the Naga insurgent leader, used these abandoned stocks to begin organising an armed force, later referred to as the Naga Home Guard. However, these weapons, largely of Second World War vintage, were limited in both quantity and effectiveness and proved insufficient for sustaining a prolonged insurgency.[1] This constraint led the Naga leadership to seek external support.

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[1] E N Rammohan, "The Weapons Trail in India's Northeast", *USI Journal*, CXLI (587), January–March, 2012, at https://usiofindia.org/pdf/USI%20Journal%20January-March%202012-15-18.pdf.

External Sources of Weapons: Pakistan and China

The first country approached by the Naga rebels for both moral and materiel support was Pakistan. In a significant move, Phizo travelled to East Pakistan in December 1956 and established contact with the Pakistan Army, which agreed to provide weapons and military training to the insurgents. Consequently, a special 'Liaison Cell' was established by the Pakistani authorities to enable contact with the Naga rebels and look after their training camps.[2]

The weapons supplied by Pakistan included self-loading rifles, light machine guns and mortars, many of which had been procured by Pakistan from European sources.[3] The Pakistani authorities also helped the Naga insurgents to reach out to China for assistance in 1963, after the India–China war of 1962. The earliest evidence of Chinese assistance to Naga rebels dates to April 1966, when reports indicated that approximately 353 Naga guerrillas travelled through Upper Myanmar enroute to China to receive arms, ammunition and training in guerrilla warfare.[4] The group subsequently returned to India and established a base in the Jotsoma jungles in January 1968. A later operation by Indian security forces against this camp in June resulted in the recovery of substantial quantities of Chinese-origin weapons, including 89 semi-automatic rifles, 11 light machine guns, 42 submachine guns, one rocket launcher, six 6mm mortars and 14 pistols, along with documents that pointed to external support.[5]

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2 M. Gairiangmei R. Naga, "Naga Movement: Linkages with the Other Countries from 1950s to 1970s", *Man and Society*: *A Journal of North-East Studies*, VIII, Summer 2011, p. 94.

3 E N Rammohan, "The Weapons Trail in India's Northeast", n. 1.

4 Gordon P. Means and Ingunn N. Means, "Nagaland-The Agony of Ending a Guerrilla War", *Pacific Affairs*, 39 (¾), 1966–1967, p. 311.

5 Ajit Doval, "China Factor in North East Insurgency – Alarming Signals", *Vivekananda International Foundation*, January 31, 2011, at https://www.vifindia.org/print/617. Also see, Subir Bhowmick, *Insurgent Crossfire: North East India*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, p. 48.

Between 1967 and 1976, close to 1,000 Naga insurgents travelled through Myanmar to reach China, where they received formal military training. After completing their training, they returned to India carrying modern Chinese weaponry, including assault rifles, light machine guns and rocket launchers. During these movements, they were often assisted by cadres of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which, in exchange for facilitating safe passage, retained a portion of the weapons supplied to the Naga rebels by the Chinese.[6] Other insurgent groups from the Northeast also established similar links with China. In the early 1970s, around 200 Mizo rebels travelled to China for military training. Later, in 1975, a group of Meitei insurgents from Manipur reached Tibet via Nepal, where they underwent political indoctrination along with some level of military instruction.[7]

In the early 1980s, insurgents from Assam also attempted to establish contact with China and sought its assistance. China, however, discouraged them from travelling to China for training and procuring arms because after 1976 it had 'officially abandoned' its policy of funding and instigating global communist insurgencies. Nevertheless, it deployed Chinese instructors in the Kachin area of Myanmar to impart training to the Indian rebels. As a result, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) cadres had to train with the Kachin insurgents, who also provided them with low-grade weapons.[8] By 1991, facing continued constraints, the leadership of the ULFA and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) shifted strategy and once again sought external support through Bangladesh. They approached the Pakistan embassy in Dhaka to request the supply of arms. Pakistan promised to supply arms to insurgent groups, but routed the procurement through dealers in Bangkok and Manila.[9] These

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6 Bertil Lintner, "The Forgotten Frontier", *The Irrawady*, June 12, 2017, (earlier published in November 2014), at https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/the-forgotten-frontier.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

7 Ibid.

8 VIK Sarin, *India's North-East in Flames*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980, p. 12. Also see, Bertil Lintner, "The Forgotten Frontier", n. 6.

9 E N Rammohan, "The Weapons Trail in India's Northeast", n.1.

intermediaries operated within the region's grey arms market and likely sourced Chinese-manufactured weapons through a mix of informal and semi-clandestine channels, including surplus circulation, third-party transfers and leakage from state-controlled stockpiles.

The Grey Arms Market of Southeast Asia

Before examining the role of Southeast Asia's grey arms markets in supplying weapons to insurgent groups in Northeast India, it is important to distinguish between grey and black market transfers. Although both form part of the broader spectrum of illicit arms trafficking, they differ in terms of the degree of state involvement and legality. Grey market transfers generally involve covert or deniable state participation and operate by circumventing or exploiting regulatory frameworks, whereas black market transfers take place entirely outside official channels and without formal state sanction.[10] This distinction is particularly relevant in the Southeast Asian context, where state actors, insurgent groups, brokers and criminal networks often interacted in complex and overlapping ways to facilitate the movement of weapons across borders.

The grey arms market in Southeast Asia emerged after the Vietnam War in 1975, when countries such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were left with substantial stockpiles, many of which gradually entered illicit circulation. It is believed that the United States abandoned an estimated haul of between 1.5 million and 1.8 million SALWs and 150,000 tons of ammunition in South Vietnam. These include 90,000 M1911A1 pistols, 791,000 M15A1 pistols, 857,580 rifles, 15,000 M50 machine guns, and 47,000 IN879 grenade launchers.[11] Similarly, during

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[10] "Chapter 5: Crime, Conflict, Corruption: Global Illicit Small Arms Transfers", *Small Arms Survey 2001: Profiling the Problem*, June 2001, p.166, at https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2001-Chapter-05-EN.pdf.

[11] Rafidah Dahari, Nor Azizan Idris and Zarina Othman, "Influencing External Factors for Small Arms Light Weapon Smuggling at Malaysia-Thailand Border", *Asian Social Science*, 15 (3), 2019, p. 21.

the Cold War, Cambodia was heavily saturated with SALWs as multiple external actors, including the United States, China, Cuba, the former Czechoslovakia, France, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and the Soviet Union, armed rival factions. This influx of arms and ammunition was linked to the Cambodian Civil War and subsequent conflicts, which turned the country into a key arena of proxy warfare and left behind vast stockpiles of weapons. Between 1992 and 1993, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia recovered over 320,443 small arms and 80,729,175 rounds of ammunition from the various factions that had fought in Cambodia during the 1980s.[12] However, these seizures were widely considered to represent only a fraction of the total weapons transferred into the country by external actors such as China, Thailand, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The problem of large-scale supply of arms was compounded by weak state capacity in parts of the region, where poor governance, inadequate stockpile management and corruption enabled the diversion and leakage of weapons. Geographical factors such as long coastlines, dense forests and porous borders also played a crucial role, making effective monitoring difficult, thus facilitating smuggling. At the same time, the continued presence of insurgent and criminal groups sustained a steady demand for illicit arms. The absence of any formal agreements at the regional or international level to exercise control of SALWs, whether it be legitimate or illegitimate dealings, further aggravates the problem.[13] Through the 1980s and 1990s, the grey markets expanded and became increasingly transnational, supported by ongoing internal conflicts, particularly in Myanmar, and facilitated by trafficking routes linking mainland Southeast Asia to hubs such as Thailand and Cambodia.

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[12] Peter Chalk, "Light Arms Trading in SE Asia", *Rand*, March 1, 2001, at https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2001/03/light-arms-trading-in-se-asia.html.

[13] Rafidah Dahari, Nor Azizan Idris and Zarina Othman, "Influencing External Factors for Small Arms Light Weapon Smuggling at Malaysia-Thailand Border", n. 11, p. 18.

Thailand became an important centre for brokerage and facilitation of small arms originating from Cambodia, which were supplied to countries experiencing internal conflicts, such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India's Northeast, owing to the large surplus of weapons left behind in the aftermath of its civil war.[14] The weapon stockpiles originated from multiple overlapping sources. These included surplus arms from Cambodia's demobilised anti-Vietnamese resistance forces, as well as holdings from its government forces. In addition, consignments supplied by China to support Vietnamese resistance groups were partially diverted by corrupt Thai military commanders and subsequently sold in the black market.[15] Insurgent groups from Northeast India gained access to this grey/black market through various intermediaries.

Weapons were typically procured in Thailand, shipped to the coast of Bangladesh and then transported overland into India's Northeast through Meghalaya, Tripura or Assam, often with insurgents themselves acting as porters. Groups, such as the NSCN, the ULFA, the Bodo, Manipuri insurgents, as well as Tripuri guerrilla groups, are known to have smuggled in substantial quantities of arms through this route.[16] The consignments were transported by sea to waters near Cox's Bazar, where locally hired fishing trawlers received the cargo. Sometimes, after being landed at Cox's Bazar, the weapons were moved overland by cadres of the NSCN and the ULFA through Alikadam, south of the Mizoram border, and onward along the Tiddim Road into Churachandpur. From there, the route continued north via Kupum to the NSCN bases in Benin and Tamenglong before finally reaching Hebron, the NSCN-IM's major camp near Dimapur.[17] In a one-off episode in the mid-1990s, the Royal Thai Navy intercepted an arms shipment in the Andaman Sea linked to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur and recovered nearly two tons of weapons, including

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14 Ibid, p. 21.

15 "Focus: Southeast Asia", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 2008, p. 14.

16 Subir Bhaumik, "Guns, drugs and rebels", *Seminar*, 550, 2005, at https://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20subir%20bhaumik.htm.

17 E N Rammohan, "The Weapons Trail in India's Northeast", n. 1.

rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, assault rifles, recoilless guns, grenade launchers and over 10,000 rounds of ammunition.[18]

Cambodia's prominence as the principal source of illicit weapons in Southeast Asia's grey market, however, began to wane in the late 1990s, as the newly established Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) undertook its first serious efforts to address the challenge posed by SALW. The government acknowledged that the widespread availability and proliferation of illicit weapons, coupled with weak national stockpile security, constituted a significant threat to the country's gradually improving peace and stability.[19] Accordingly, the RGC introduced series of legal measures to curb the proliferation of firearms and strengthen control over ownership and stockpiles. These included Sub-Decree No. 68 in 1998, which effectively made the possession of weapons by private citizens illegal. This was followed by weapons collection initiatives in 1999 after the enactment of Sub-Decrees No. 27 and 28, which revoked weapon licences, and No. 38 on weapons management.[20] By January 2000, the RGC had on its own initiative destroyed over 36,000 weapons.[21]

The Cambodian government also sought international assistance mainly from EU (European Union Assistance for Curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia – EU ASAC) in April 2000 and Japan (Japanese Assistance Team for Small Arms Management in Cambodia – JSAC) in March 2003 to enhance the regulation, collection, destruction and management of SALW in the country. By September 2007, a total of 207,999 weapons had been destroyed in the country.[22] The effective

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[18] Wasbir Hussain, "Insurgency in India's Northeast Cross-border Links and Strategic Alliances", *Faultline*, 15, February 2006, at https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume17/wasbir.htm.

[19] *Evaluation of the EU Small Arms and Light Weapons Assistance to the Kingdom of Cambodia (EU-ASAC)-2nd Edition*, South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Serbia, July 25, 2006, p. 3.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Rebecca Roberts, "Cambodia: Surplus Destruction after War and Genocide", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 29 (1), April 2008, pp.103.

[22] Ibid.

implementation of Cambodia's weapons destruction and stockpile management programme significantly curtailed its role as the primary source of SALW in Southeast Asia's grey market. However, rather than eliminating illicit arms flows, this created a structural supply vacuum. Demand for weapons, driven by ongoing insurgencies, criminal networks and weak border controls, remained unchanged. This resulting vacuum was gradually filled by Chinese-manufactured weapons, which emerged as the principal source of both surplus and newly produced arms. The Chittagong arms haul, in fact, revealed this shift.

In April 2004, the Bangladeshi authorities intercepted a major illicit consignment believed to have been destined for the ULFA and the NSCN (I-M) at a jetty in the Karnaphuli River near Chittagong. The consignment, which was intercepted from ten trucks, included the shipment – altogether worth an estimated US$4.5 million–US$7 million – is known to have included around 2,000 automatic and semi-automatic weapons, among them 1,290 Type 56-1/Type 56-2 Kalashnikov-type assault rifles, 150 T-69 RPG launchers, quantities of 40mm RPG ammunition, 25,000 hand-grenades and 1.8m rounds of small-arms ammunition.[23] Testimony from arms dealer Hafizur Rehman and subsequent intelligence assessments indicated that the shipment had been routed from Hong Kong, marking one of the last large consignments of original Chinese-manufactured weapons entering South Asia through established maritime channels.[24]

Chinese State-run Ordnance Factories

The emergence of China as an important source of SALW for the region's grey markets was closely linked to changes in China's defence industry and arms-export system during the late 1990s. In 1998, at the

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[23] "Focus: Southeast Asia", n. 15, p.16.

[24] Subir Bhaumik, "Where do 'Chinese' guns arming rebels really come from?", *BBC News*, Calcutta, August 3, 2010, at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-10626034. Also see, Namrata Goswami, "Tracking the source of 'Weapon Providers' for NE Rebels", *IDSA Comment*, November 7, 2013, at https://idsa.in/publisher/comments/tracking-the-source-of-weapon-providers-for-ne-rebels.

Ninth National People's Congress, the Chinese leadership undertook reforms aimed at restructuring the defence industry and separating governmental functions from the commercial operations of defence enterprises.[25] Prior to these reforms, PLA-affiliated enterprises had reportedly been closely involved in defence production and arms-related commercial activities, often operating with limited oversight. This institutional arrangement was associated with concerns over inefficiency, corruption and weak accountability, while also creating opportunities for weapons and military equipment to move beyond formal state-controlled channels. The reforms sought to address these shortcomings by separating state functions from enterprise operations and introducing greater commercial autonomy and competition. As part of the restructuring, individual enterprises within the large defence-industrial groups were given greater autonomy to improve their viability and competitiveness.[26]

At the same time, China strengthened the formal regulation of arms exports. The Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Administration of Arms Export, promulgated in 1997 and revised in 2002, established a unified system of state supervision over arms exports.[27] The regulations placed responsibility for arms-export administration under the competent state authorities, required enterprises to obtain approval to conduct arms-export business, introduced licensing requirements and required documentation concerning the recipient country. Major export projects and contracts were subject to additional scrutiny and approval.[28] These measures institutionalised state supervision by restricting export activities to a limited number of

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[25] Evan S. Medeiros et al., *A New Direction for China's Defense Industry*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2005, pp. 23–32.

[26] Ibid, p. 30.

[27] "Regulations on Administration of Arms Export", *The Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China*, September 11, 2015, at https://english.court.gov.cn/2015-09/11/c_1170206_2.htm.

[28] Ibid.

authorised enterprises operating within a formalised regulatory structure.[29]

While these reforms strengthened formal controls over the production and export of arms, they did not necessarily prevent Chinese-manufactured SALW from reaching illicit markets through channels operating outside the formal export system. With the dismantling of decentralised PLA-linked commercial networks, illicit circulation of Chinese-manufactured arms increasingly involved private intermediaries, including brokers and front companies. Within this evolving system, Chinese-manufactured small arms, including those produced by state-owned enterprises such as China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO)[30], entered regional grey markets through a variety of channels.

Evidence indicates that significant quantities of these weapons were obtained by private arms dealers and organised criminal groups, particularly in the Yunnan province, which because of its geographical position along China's border with Myanmar and its extensive cross-border trade, emerged as an important node connecting Chinese sources with trafficking networks in Southeast Asia.[31] Transactions were reportedly facilitated through intermediary companies based in mainland China and, in some cases, Hong Kong, whose extensive trading and financial networks could provide opportunities for concealing the movement of illicit consignments.[32]

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29 Mark Bromley, Mathieu Duchâtel and Paul Holtom "China's Exports of Small Arms and Light Weapons" *SIPRI Policy Paper no. 38*, October 2013, Solna, pp. 22–23, at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRIPP38.pdf.

30 "Chinese arms company supplied arms to Northeast insurgent groups, Thai gun-runner reveals", *India Today*, New Delhi, April 2, 2014, at https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/chinese-arms-company-supplied-arms-to-northeast-insurgent-groups-35044.html.

31 Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, HarperCollins Publishers, New Delhi, 2012, p. 187.

32 "Focus: Southeast Asia", n.15, p. 16.

These dynamics were further reinforced by structural weaknesses in China's export control system. Limited transparency in reporting SALW export data and destinations restricted external scrutiny, while the absence of clearly institutionalised procedures for assessing diversion risks weakened pre-export controls. In addition, the system relied heavily on end-user assurances provided by importing states, with minimal capacity for independent verification. The lack of robust post-shipment monitoring mechanisms meant that once weapons were transferred, their subsequent movement remained largely untracked.[33] As a result, once weapons were transferred, their subsequent movement often remained untracked, creating opportunities for diversion into illicit circuits.

The question of Chinese state involvement, however, remains contested. One interpretation is that the presence of Chinese-origin weapons among non-state actors can largely be explained by commercial incentives, diversion, corruption and weaknesses in regulatory enforcement, rather than by deliberate state policy. From this perspective, the reforms of the 1990s and stronger arms-export controls marked a further move away from China's earlier support for revolutionary movements abroad through arms supplies. A major change in this policy was announced at the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1982, when China adopted an independent foreign policy and moved away from supporting the export of communist revolution and providing overt assistance to foreign revolutionary movements.[34] Thereafter, China placed greater emphasis on non-interference, state-to-state relations and economic engagement.

A different interpretation, however, points to the persistence of Chinese-origin weapons among insurgent organisations and to reports of contacts between Chinese officials or intelligence personnel and the Northeast insurgent groups. According to this view, the continued presence of Chinese-origin weapons among insurgent and other non-

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[33] Mark Bromley, Mathieu Duchâtel and Paul Holtom "China's Exports of Small Arms and Light Weapons", n. 29, pp. 26–33.

[34] "Focus: Southeast Asia", n. 15, p. 17.

state actors cannot always be explained solely through commercial transactions, diversion and corruption. These analysts point to the possibility of tacit state tolerance or indirect involvement.[35] Indian intelligence assessments have periodically alleged a more direct Chinese role in arms procurement by the Northeast insurgent organisations. A former Union Home Secretary, for example, stated in an interview that insurgent representatives from the Northeast had held regular meetings with Chinese intelligence officials in Yunnan and Nepal in connection with the supply and movement of weapons. He further argued that the procedures involved in shipment, export orders and regulatory compliance would have been difficult to undertake without some form of Chinese involvement.[36]

Reports concerning insurgent activity in areas along the China–Myanmar border have contributed to similar perceptions. The growing availability of Chinese-origin weapons had helped fill the supply vacuum created by the decline of Cambodian stockpiles. Unlike the earlier flows of ageing and heterogeneous weapons from Cambodia, Chinese-origin arms included both surplus and newly produced weapons that were more standardised, widely available and relatively easy to integrate into existing trafficking networks. These weapons entered regional markets through a combination of authorised exports that were subsequently diverted and unauthorised trafficking, with weak governance and porous borders in transit states such as Myanmar and Bangladesh facilitating their onward movement. The growing availability of these weapons consequently expanded the options available to insurgent organisations in India's Northeast such as the ULFA and the NSCN and contributed to a shift in the region's sources of illicit arms supply.

By the end of the 1990s, Yunnan-based criminal networks had emerged as key intermediaries linking Chinese sources to insurgent groups via the Myanmar–Bangladesh corridor. Compared to traditional

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[35] Ibid.

[36] '"China given evidence of its aid to NE insurgents"', *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, February 14, 2012, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/china-given-evidence-of-its-aid-to-ne-insurgents/story-49GcNqhOUYOS6AK1oHkGfI.html.

procurement routes through Southeast Asian hubs like Thailand, weapons sourced from Yunnan were significantly cheaper, reportedly up to 50 per cent less, making them particularly attractive to insurgent groups operating under financial constraints.[37] Chinese-made weapons are reportedly smuggled across the China–Myanmar border at Ruili and transported through Myanmar via Lashio, Mandalay and Monywa before reaching the India–Myanmar border. Reports have also indicated that Chinese intelligence personnel visited Indian insurgent camps near Taga in Myanmar on several occasions. Similarly, Indian intelligence sources have reported that ULFA leader Paresh Barua was based for periods in or around Ruili in China's Yunnan province. Such reports have contributed to perceptions of Chinese awareness or acquiescence towards some Northeast insurgents' activities.[38]

The available evidence on procurement of arms by the Northeast insurgent organisations provides a more concrete basis for assessing the Chinese connection. An important example is the case of Anthony Shimray, the chief arms procurer of the NSCN (I-M). In March 2011, the NIA filed a chargesheet against Shimray and other accused persons in connection with the organisation's efforts to procure arms from foreign sources.[39] The investigation documented dealings with Chinese companies and intermediaries and provided detailed evidence of financial transactions, communication and proposed shipping arrangements. According to the NIA investigation, Shimray had been involved in negotiations for an arms deal with NORINCO during the 1990s. The investigation indicated that the NSCN (I-M) sought approximately 1,800 weapons through this channel, with the

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37 Subir Bhaumik, "Guns, drugs and rebels", n.16.

38 Indrani Bagchi, "India, Myanmar agree to fight terrorism jointly", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 16 July 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-myanmar-agree-to-fight-terrorism-jointly/articleshow/48099886.cms.

39 Rahul Tripathi, "NIA chargesheet: NSCN got arms from Chinese firms", *Indian Express*, 1 April 2011, New Delhi, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/nia-chargesheet-nscn-got-arms-from-chinese-firms/.

consignment reaching Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh in 1996. However, a substantial portion of the shipment was intercepted by Bangladeshi security forces while it was being unloaded.[40]

The NIA investigation also documented a later attempt by the NSCN (I-M) to procure another large consignment from China. Following the loss of weapons after desertions within the organisation in 2007, Shimray sought approximately 1,000 firearms and other weapons, including AK-series rifles, light machine guns, pistols and rocket-propelled grenades. He was introduced to a Bangkok-based arms intermediary, Wuthikorn Naruenartwanich, alias Willy, who in turn connected the NSCN (I-M) with Yuthna, a representative of the Chinese company TCL.[41] The NIA described TCL as a Chinese supplier and investigated its links to NORINCO; other reports described TCL as an intermediary or possible front through which weapons were to be procured from NORINCO. According to the NIA, Shimray coordinated the transaction after obtaining approval for the weapons list from a senior functionary based in Dimapur, with communication conducted via email.[42]

The proposed transaction involved substantial financial and logistical arrangements. The NIA chargesheet recorded payments to TCL through Willy, including a payment of US$100,000 in May 2009 and a subsequent transfer of approximately US$700,000 from funds received by Shimray in Bangkok. A further US$100,000 was reportedly paid to a Bangkok-based shipping agent linked to Intermarine Shipping Company.[43] The NIA investigation recovered electronic communications and receipts relating to the proposed transactions. The proposed consignment was

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40 Wasbir Hussain, "Insurgency in Northeast India: The Chinese Link", n.18.

41 Deeptiman Tiwary, "Thai Court okay extradition of gun runner supplying Chinese arms to naga rebels", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 1 April, 2014, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/33043729.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

42 Rahul Tripathi, "NIA chargesheet: NSCN got arms from Chinese firms", n. 39.

43 Ibid.

to be loaded at Beihai in southern China and delivered offshore near Cox's Bazar, where it would be transferred to smaller fishing vessels for onward movement. The shipment was ultimately not completed. According to the NIA investigation, Shimray postponed the operation after assessing that conditions in Bangladesh were unfavourable. He was subsequently arrested by Indian authorities.

The case demonstrates the extent to which the Northeast insurgent organisations had developed access to a major Chinese arms manufacturer through intermediaries and transnational commercial networks. It also illustrates the importance of Bangladesh and Myanmar as transit and logistical points in the movement of Chinese-origin weapons towards Northeast India.

Insurgent Groups as Illicit Arms Traders

Until the mid-1990s, a significant proportion of arms destined for insurgent groups in Northeast India reportedly originated from the grey markets of Thailand and Cambodia. Arms consignments were typically transported by sea to Cox's Bazar and other parts of Chittagong in Bangladesh, before being routed to different insurgent groups in the Northeast. Entry points such as Sonamura in Tripura, the Jaintia and Garo Hills in Meghalaya and Dhubri in Assam emerged as important corridors for supplying weapons to organisations including the NSCN-IM, ULFA, Bodo insurgent groups, and various Manipuri rebel outfits.[44] However, developments during 1995–1996 significantly altered these trafficking patterns. Operation Golden Bird, conducted by the Indian Army along the India–Myanmar border in Mizoram, along with a mysterious explosion aboard a vessel carrying arms consignments, exposed the vulnerabilities of existing maritime routes through Bangladesh. Consequently, arms-smuggling routes increasingly shifted towards overland and riverine routes through Myanmar, which were perceived as safer, less time-consuming and more difficult for state authorities to monitor.

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[44] Rajeev Bhattacharyya, "Small Arms Proliferation in the Northeast: The Chinese Connection", *Aakrosh,* 13 (13), p. 55.

In this context, insurgent groups based in Myanmar's borderlands began to play a crucial role in supplying arms to insurgent organisations in Northeast India. Over time, procurement networks gradually shifted from the grey markets of Thailand and Cambodia to the comparatively less regulated border regions of Myanmar. This transition not only reduced the financial costs associated with procurement and transportation, but also enabled arms deliveries to occur much closer to the India–Myanmar border, thereby minimising logistical risks and exposure to state surveillance.

Among the most prominent actors facilitating these networks were the Karen National Union (KNU), the KIA, and later the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Although these organisations originated as ethnic insurgent movements engaged in conflict with the Myanmar state, their sustained control over strategic territories and cross-border routes enabled them to evolve into key intermediaries in the regional illicit arms trade. Their proximity to China, combined with access to long-established trafficking channels operating across Myanmar's frontier regions, further strengthened their role in the procurement, storage and transit of weapons destined for insurgent groups in Northeast India.

The KNU, operating along the Thailand–Myanmar border, was among the earliest groups to establish extensive transnational arms networks. Its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), was one of the earliest recipients of external arms assistance, dating back to the Second World War when the United Kingdom reportedly supplied around 12,000 weapons to the Karen to fight the Japanese soldiers.[45] In subsequent years, some of the covert arms shipments provided by the United States to the Kuomintang (KMT) forces also appear to have reached the KNLA. There are claims that the KMT offered arms and ammunition directly to the KNLA in exchange for assistance in securing access to the sea at Moulmein, although only a

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[45] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, London, 1999, p. 63.

limited portion of the promised weapons is believed to have been delivered.[46] However, the bulk of the weapons supplied to the KNLA originated from Thailand. Arms supplies to insurgent groups inside Myanmar from Thailand were often quietly tolerated as part of Bangkok's 'buffer' strategy, aimed at keeping communist forces, drug traffickers and the Tatmadaw at a distance. In the early Cold War period, both Thailand and its key ally, the United States, supported the idea of maintaining a belt of armed groups along the Thailand–Myanmar border to act as a strategic barrier between the two states.[47]

The KNU not only sustained its own insurgency but also engaged in various forms of informal economic activity, including the facilitation of arms transfers. Its strategic location allowed it to interact with arms brokers and traffickers operating out of Thai border towns, thereby positioning it as a conduit between Southeast Asian supply hubs and insurgent groups further west. The Indian insurgent organisations such as the ULFA and factions of the NSCN sourced their weapons from the KNLA. For example, in February 1993, the 'foreign secretary' of the ULFA, Sashadhar Choudhury, reportedly travelled from Bangladesh to Manerplaw in Myanmar, where he met Bo Mya of the KNU and requested approximately 100,000 weapons. The first consignment reportedly included 775 AK-56 rifles, 65 GPMGs, ten rocket-propelled guns, over 100 anti-tank and antipersonnel shells, 50 pistols, and assorted ammunition.[48]

Similarly, the KIA had been an important source of arms and military training for insurgent groups operating in Northeast India. During the 1980s, organisations such as the ULFA and the PLA of Manipur relied heavily on the KIA for guerrilla training, access to weapons and the

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[46] Ibid, p. 153.

[47] Pasuk Phongpaichit, et. al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand Illegal Economy and Public Policy*, Silkworm Books, Bangkok, 1998, p. 129.

[48] Binalakshmi Nepram, "The Origin and Impact of Small Wars and Insurgencies in the North East", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, 5 (3–4), July–December 2001, p. 80.

establishment of bases in northern Myanmar.[49] Recognising the KIA's role in aiding Northeast insurgents, India covertly engaged with the organisation, reportedly offering limited assistance and trade concessions in return for the gradual cessation of support to rebel groups by the end of the 1980s.[50]

The UWSA, on the other hand, became a prominent supplier of arms to the Northeast rebels in the 2000s. In the aftermath of the 2004 Chittagong arms seizure and the subsequent crackdown by Bangladesh on insurgent networks, the ULFA, the NSCN and other Northeast insurgent groups were compelled to reconfigure their supply chains. They increasingly turned to the UWSA.[51] Founded in 1989 as the military wing of the United Wa State Party (UWSP), the UWSA emerged from former cadres of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and members of the Wa ethnic movement. Over time, it developed into one of the most powerful armed groups in Myanmar's borderlands, with extensive involvement in the illicit small arms trade across South and Southeast Asia.

Reports suggest that the UWSA initially emerged as a key intermediary between Chinese arms manufacturers and insurgent groups operating in Northeast India, largely due to the highly profitable nature of the illicit arms trade. The scale of these profits is reflected in the substantial price escalation of weapons along the supply chain. For instance, a Chinese-made automatic rifle costing approximately US$500 in eastern Myanmar could fetch as much as US$2,500 once delivered to insurgent groups in Northeast India. Evidence of the UWSA's involvement in this network first surfaced in November 2001, when Myanmar authorities intercepted a consignment of several hundred Chinese assault rifles en route from UWSA-controlled territory to Tamu, a town near the Indian border. The shipment was reportedly intended for the United

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[49] E N Rammohan, "The Insurgent North-East", in B. B. Kumar (ed.), *Problems of Ethnicity in North-East India*, Delhi, Asthabharati, 2006, p. 58.

[50] Subir Bhaumik, "Guns, drugs and rebels", n. 16.

[51] Subir Bhaumik, "Where do 'Chinese' guns arming rebels really come from?", n. 24.

National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur and possibly other insurgent organisations in the region.[52]

The UWSA also began locally producing Chinese-designed weapons through informal arrangements with Chinese ordnance factories, reportedly acquiring technical expertise and production support in exchange for payments. Although the quality of these weapons was initially considered poor, manufacturing standards reportedly improved over time, enabling the production of close replicas of original Chinese arms.[53]

Another supplier of arms to the Northeast insurgents in Myanmar was Zakhung Ting Ying, a warlord and a former commander of the CPB. When the CPB collapsed in 1989, Ting Ying formed the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K). The NDA-K signed a ceasefire with the military the same year and was given effective autonomy over territory along the border with China's Yunnan province. The Myanmar government recognised NDA-K, and in 2009, the NDA-K was converted into a border guard force and came under the military's nominal command.[54] Meanwhile, Zakhung Ting Ying exploited his contacts with China and set up an arms-manufacturing factory at Pangwa in Myanmar's Kachin state. With the help of Chinese technicians, Ting Ying's arms factory produced automatic rifles, revolvers and shotguns, which were sold to Indian insurgent groups. The arms were transported from Myitkyina to Mogaung to Hkamti and then to the Taga camp, headquarters of the United National Liberation Front of the Western Southeast Asia (UNLFWSA).[55]

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52 "Focus: Southeast Asia", n.15, p. 16.

53 Subir Bhaumik, "Where do 'Chinese' guns arming rebels really come from?", n. 24.

54 Bertil Lintner, "Mysterious Motives: India's Raids on the Burma Border", *The Irrawaddy*, June 30, 2015, at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/ethnic-issues/mysterious-motives-indias-raids-on-the-burma-border.html. Bibhu Prasad Routrey, "Made in Myanmar: Small Arms for North-Eastern Insurgents", *Mantraya Special Report#01*, July 13, 2015, at https://miss.org.in/made-in-myanmar-small-arms-for-north-eastern-insurgents/.

55 Ibid.

Over time, the NSCN-IM and ULFA developed extensive transnational procurement networks that enabled them to acquire weapons from suppliers and trafficking networks operating across Southeast Asia. Their longstanding connections with arms dealers in Thailand and Myanmar, insurgent groups based in Myanmar and trafficking routes through Bangladesh and Myanmar gave them access to Chinese-origin and other small arms. Their presence along the China–Myanmar–Bangladesh–Northeast India corridor further facilitated their access to regional arms markets. These networks also enabled both organisations to extend their activities beyond the procurement of weapons for their own use, creating channels through which arms could reach other insurgent groups in Northeast India.

The NSCN-IM was among the earliest insurgent organisations in Northeast India to establish sustained procurement links with black market suppliers in Southeast Asia. Through contacts in Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh, it acquired arms and ammunition and developed a logistical network for moving these supplies into the Northeast. Intelligence assessments and security studies have also linked the organisation to the provision of training, transit facilities and procurement assistance to other insurgent groups, enabling it to play a broader intermediary role in the regional arms trade.

The ULFA, particularly through the network associated with its military commander Paresh Barua, similarly developed extensive procurement links with arms suppliers in Myanmar and China-linked trafficking networks. Its activities reportedly extended beyond procuring weapons for its own cadres, with security agencies linking its network to the supply of arms to groups including the NDFB, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). The established networks of these organisations also attracted interest from militant groups outside Northeast India, with reports indicating attempts by Maoist organisations in Nepal and India, as well as jihadi organisations in Bangladesh, to gain access to these procurement channels.[56]

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[56] Subir Bhaumik, "Where do 'Chinese' guns arming rebels really come from?", n.24.

Although the influence of traditional insurgent trafficking networks has fluctuated over time, the continued recovery of foreign-origin weapons in contemporary conflicts suggests that cross-border arms flows into the Northeast have not been entirely disrupted. The ongoing violence in Manipur provides a notable example, where security agencies have documented the presence of a diverse range of foreign-manufactured firearms and munitions among armed groups operating in the state. Several of the weapons recovered from both Meitei and Kuki armed groups—including American M4 carbine, AR-15 and M16 rifles, German-made Heckler & Koch assault rifles, Chinese AK-56 rifles, Myanmar-manufactured MA1 MK-3 rifles and British-origin Mk-5 rifles—are similar to those used by various armed organisations active in Myanmar.[57] The presence of foreign-origin firearms and munitions among armed groups in Manipur points to the continued relevance of cross-border arms networks operating along the Indo-Myanmar frontier.

Given the porous border and longstanding ethnic linkages between communities on both sides, it is plausible that at least some of these weapons entered Manipur through trafficking channels connected to Myanmar-based armed actors. In fact, in recent years, Lawngtlai district in southwestern Mizoram has increasingly drawn attention as an emerging transit corridor for illicit trafficking along the India–Myanmar border. Over the past few years, the Assam Rifles and the Mizoram Police have reported a steady rise in contraband, especially smuggling of arms, ammunition through Lawngtlai. On September 11, 2021, in a joint operation by the Assam Rifles and state police, two Myanmar nationals from Chin State who had entered India illegally, along with a local resident of Lawngtlai, were arrested. The individuals were apprehended at Archung village while allegedly transporting 1,800 rounds of AK-47 ammunition. Just four days later, the Assam Rifles

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[57] Subham Tiwari and Bidisha Saha, "Deep dive: The high-tech weapon behind Manipur bloodshed", *India Today*, New Delhi, 12 September 2024, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-violence-high-tech-weapon-behind-bloodshed-2598549-2024-09-12.

recovered another consignment consisting of two sniper rifles, one AK-series rifle, a magazine and 26 rounds of ammunition.[58]

These incidents followed an earlier seizure on June 4, 2021, when security forces recovered a substantial cache of ammunition near Parva in Lawngtlai district. The consignment included 1,008 rounds of 5.56 mm ammunition and one round of a 40 mm under barrel grenade launcher (UBGL). Three individuals suspected of having links with the Kuki–Chin National Army (KCNA) were arrested during the operation.[59] According to an Assam Rifles press statement, the scale of the seizure also raised suspicions about the possible involvement of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the trafficking network. The emergence of Lawngtlai as a new route has raised security concerns.

The smuggling networks operating in the Lawngtlai corridor exhibit certain recurring patterns. First, traffickers often use remote roads, forest tracks and riverine routes to bypass regular checkpoints. Small vehicles, motorcycles, or even foot porters are frequently used to transport consignments across the border. Second, traffickers rely heavily on cross-border intermediaries, including individuals from Myanmar who transport weapons and other contraband into Indian territory. Once inside Mizoram, the goods are handed over to local facilitators who move them further into India or onward to Bangladesh through Assam and Tripura. The involvement of local people in smuggling of arms is evident and causes concerns. Third, smuggling networks often combine multiple commodities within a single operation. Arms and ammunition may be transported alongside drugs, wildlife products, or consumer goods, which helps conceal the illegal cargo and diversify profits. This

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[58] "Myanmarese nationals arrested with weapon and ammunition in Mizoram", *India Today NE*, Aizawl, September 16, 2021, at https://www.indiatodayne.in/top-stories/story/myanmarese-nationals-arrested-412566-2021-09-16.

[59] Karishma Hasnat, "District strategic to India-Myanmar road project emerges as 'new trafficking route' for weapons into Mizoram", *The Print*, Guwahati, September 27, 2023, at https://theprint.in/india/district-strategic-to-india-myanmar-road-project-emerges-as-new-trafficking-route-for-weapons-into-mizoram/1779269/.

multi-layered smuggling economy has created a complex criminal ecosystem operating across the border.

Several factors have contributed in making Lawngtlai a new route for smuggling of arms and ammunition. First, Mizoram shares 510 km long unfenced and mountainous border with Myanmar. Such rugged terrain makes surveillance of the border difficult, thereby creating opportunities for smuggling networks to operate. Second, Lawngtlai is proximate to Myanmar's Chin State, an area which is affected by armed conflict and insurgent activity, especially after the 2021 Coup d'état in Myanmar. Third, the Mizos share a strong cross-border ethnic ties with Chins, referring them as their brothers. Thus, rugged territory, porous and poorly guarded with no border fencing and strong traditional cross-border ethnic ties provide conditions that facilitate clandestine movement of people and goods.[60] As a result, the district has become part of a broader trafficking corridor connecting Myanmar with north-eastern India and, in some cases, Bangladesh.

While the Northeast has historically been a major point for illicit weapons entering India through transnational networks linked to Myanmar, Bangladesh and regional insurgent groups, India's western border has emerged as another significant source of illicit weapons. Pakistan-based trafficking networks have long been involved in supplying arms to terrorist groups, separatist organisations and criminal actors within India. Supported by well-established smuggling routes and, at times, aided by state and non-state actors across the border, these networks have introduced a range of sophisticated weapons into the country. The following chapter examines the routes, actors and mechanisms through which weapons originating from or transiting through Pakistan have contributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in India.

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[60] Ibid.

Chapter II

Arms Trafficking Across India's Western Border

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons through India's western border in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir was shaped by a distinct set of geopolitical, strategic and historical factors that differed significantly from those influencing insurgencies in Northeast India. While insurgent groups in the Northeast largely depended on transnational trafficking networks linking Southeast Asian grey markets, Chinese arms suppliers and Myanmar-based insurgent groups, militant organisations operating in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir benefited from their proximity to Pakistan and the extensive infrastructure developed to support cross-border terrorism and militancy.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Afghan jihad transformed South Asia into one of the world's largest repositories of illicit weapons. Massive inflows of arms supplied by the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, Egypt and other countries to support the Afghan resistance generated extensive stockpiles of military-grade weaponry across Pakistan and Afghanistan. The conflict also facilitated the emergence of sophisticated smuggling networks, arms bazaars and clandestine procurement channels that survived long after the end of the war. As these networks expanded, weapons originally intended for the Afghan theatre increasingly found their way into other conflict zones in South Asia.

In this context, Pakistan emerged as the principal external source and facilitator of arms supplies to Sikh and Kashmiri militant organisations in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir.

The Afghan Jihad and Regional Weapons Proliferation

Proliferation of SALW in Afghanistan commenced with the Soviet Union's military intervention in support of the Afghan communist

government in December 1979. The political crisis that culminated in the Soviet Union sending in thousands of troops to Afghanistan can be traced to the growing instability that followed the Saur Revolution in 1978 that overthrew the government of Mohammed Daoud Khan and brought the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) under Nur Mohammad Taraki to power. The new regime, closely aligned with the Soviet Union, introduced land redistribution, social reform and secularisation programmes while carrying out widespread suppression of opposition. These measures generated widespread resistance among Afghanistan's predominantly Muslim and tribal population. By late 1978, armed uprisings had spread across the country, giving rise to the Mujahideen insurgency. As the rebellion intensified and internal divisions weakened the regime, the Soviet Union became increasingly involved in supporting the Afghan government, culminating in its military intervention in December 1979.[1]

In response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the United States launched a large-scale covert programme in 1980 to arm the Afghan Mujahideen. The operation was coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in partnership with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). To maintain plausible deniability, Washington initially avoided supplying American weapons directly and instead procured Soviet-designed arms, including AK-47 and Chinese Type 56 assault rifles, from China. It also procured Italian produced Technovar antipersonnel mines from Egypt.[2] Interestingly, the US also sourced 100,000 rifles from India. Additional weapons and military equipment were obtained from countries such as Turkey, Israel and Pakistan, while Saudi Arabia provided substantial financial support for the programme.[3] Over the

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1 A. Hyman, *The Saur Revolution. In: Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964–91*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1992.

2 Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", in Jeffery Boutwell, Michael T. Klare and Laura W. Reed (eds.), *Lethal Commerce, the Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons*, America Academy of Arts and Sciences, Massachusetts, 1995, p. 62.

3 Gyula Speck, *SALW Proliferation and State Fragility: The Case of Afghanistan*, Institute of World Economics, Budapest, February 2024, p. 14.

course of the conflict, the United States supplied hundreds of thousands of assault rifles and, from 1986 onwards, introduced Stinger surface-to-air missiles to enhance the Mujahideen's capabilities.[4] Arms supplies to the Afghan Mujahideen grew substantially during the 1980s. While an estimated 10,000 tonnes of weaponry were transferred through Pakistan in 1983, the volume of military assistance had risen to approximately 65,000 tonnes by 1987.[5]

These arms were transported to Pakistan, either directly or through intermediary transit points such as Oman, and then moved to distribution centres around Peshawar and Quetta before being channelled to Afghan Mujahideen groups operating inside Afghanistan.[6] Importantly, the United States' decision to entrust the ISI with the primary responsibility for the distribution of weapons, partly to maintain plausible deniability regarding its involvement, had far-reaching consequences for regional security in South Asia. Given the emphasis on secrecy and the absence of effective oversight, record-keeping relating to the procurement and distribution of weapons was often inadequate. Detailed documentation was rarely maintained, shipping manifests were deliberately kept vague or incomplete, and many transactions were conducted in cash, making it difficult to trace the movement of arms or ensure accountability.[7]

The weak oversight mechanisms and inadequate record-keeping that characterised the covert arms programme created ample opportunities for diversion and leakage. As weapons moved through the supply chain, significant quantities were reportedly siphoned off at various stages, with the ISI, Afghan political leaders and local field commanders benefiting from the diversion of arms. For many field commanders,

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4 Alan J. Kuperman, "The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan", *Political Science Quarterly*, 114 (2), Summer 1999, pp. 219–263.

5 Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", n. 2, p. 63.

6 Ibid, p. 62.

7 Ibid, pp. 63–64.

the illicit sale of weapons became a means of generating revenue to finance operational expenses, including transportation, food supplies, recruitment and the evacuation of fighters.[8] The scale of weapons diversion was highlighted by the case of the FIM-92 Stinger missile. Reports indicate that the CIA supplied around 1,000 Stinger missiles to the Afghan Mujahideen, but as many as 600 were never recovered.[9] There were reports that 312 of these were sold in the Landi Kotal arms market in January 1993.[10]

The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1988–89 following the Geneva Accords did not bring an end to the proliferation of SALW in the region. On the contrary, reports suggest that immediately after the signing of the Geneva Agreement and in the run-up to the Soviet withdrawal, the United States had increased its military assistance to the Mujahideen in an effort to accelerate the withdrawal and weaken the Kabul regime. Among the weapons supplied during this period were Milan anti-tank missile systems, Chinese Type-83 mine-clearing rockets, and Egyptian and Chinese 122 mm artillery rockets. In addition to externally supplied arms, the Mujahideen also acquired substantial quantities of Soviet weaponry captured from government forces, including AK-74 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, recoilless rifles and sniper weapons.[11]

Even after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, Afghanistan remained heavily militarised and awash with weapons. Prior to their departure, the Soviets installed the pro-Moscow government of Mohammad Najibullah in Kabul and continued to sustain it through substantial

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[8] Ibid, p. 64. Also see, Aqab Malik, "Darra Adam Khel 'Home Grown' Weapons", *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie*, 1st Quarter, 2016, p. 84.

[9] Mark Sedra, "Small arms in Afghanistan: fostering the conditions for disarmament", *RUSI*, November 19, 2007, at https://www.rusi.org/publication/small-arms-afghanistan-fostering-conditions-disarmament.

[10] Aqab Malik, "Darra Adam Khel 'Home Grown' Weapons", n. 8, p. 85.

[11] Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", n. 2, p. 65.

military and economic assistance.[12] The Soviet military reportedly left behind arms stockpiles worth between US$1 billion and US$1.5 billion and continued to provide substantial military aid, including over 51,000 tonnes of ammunition, more than 135,000 small arms and light weapons, over 1,300 SCUD missiles and dozens of multiple-launch rocket systems.[13] At the same time, the United States maintained its support for the Mujahideen factions opposing the regime, ensuring that the flow of arms into Afghanistan did not cease with the end of the Soviet occupation. For instance, Washington reportedly allocated approximately US$250 million for weapons supplies to the Mujahideen in 1991 alone.[14]

The continuation of external military assistance prolonged the conflict and contributed to the accumulation of vast stockpiles of SALW among rival factions. The collapse of the Najibullah government in April 1992, following the cessation of Soviet aid and the subsequent Bush administration's decision to terminate military assistance to the Mujahideen, did not bring an end to the proliferation of weapons generated by the Afghan conflict. Instead, the vast arsenals accumulated over the preceding decade continued to circulate through an expanding web of militant groups, illicit markets and trafficking networks across the region. The persistence of these arsenals played a crucial role in fuelling the proliferation of SALW across Pakistan, Afghanistan and the wider South Asian region during the 1990s.

Pakistan's Covert and Informal Arms Networks

The Afghan jihad transformed Pakistan from a mere transit route for externally supplied weapons into a major repository and redistribution

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[12] Zalmay Khalilzad, "Anarchy in Afghanistan", *Journal of International Affairs*, 51 (1), South Asia: The Challenges of Statehood, Summer 1997, p. 43.

[13] Shane A. Smith, "Afghanistan after the Occupation: Examining the Post-Soviet Withdrawal and the Najibullah Regime It Left Behind, 1989–1992", *The Historian*, 76, (2), Summer 2014, pp. 316–317.

[14] Michael Rubin, "Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?", *Washington Institute Policy Analysis*, March 1, 2002, at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-responsible-taliban.

centre for SALW in South Asia. As the principal agency responsible for receiving and distributing military assistance to the Afghan Mujahideen, Pakistan's ISI handled enormous consignments of arms and ammunition supplied by the United States and its allies. The scale of these transfers, coupled with inadequate oversight and widespread leakages from the supply chain, ensured that substantial quantities of SALW remained within Pakistan. The extent of the weapon stockpiles reportedly available to Pakistan's security establishment is illustrated by an account attributed to a former head of the ISI, who allegedly told an American journalist in the early 1990s that the agency still had access to approximately three million Kalashnikov rifles, "packed and greased"[15]. Although the precise size of these stockpiles is difficult to verify, there is little doubt that the Afghan conflict left Pakistan awash with weapons. The concentration of such arsenals significantly enhanced the state's capacity to channel arms beyond the Afghan theatre in pursuit of its broader strategic objectives.

Parallel to these covert state-controlled channels, a thriving illicit market in military-grade weapons emerged in Pakistan's frontier regions. As discussed, the absence of adequate mechanisms to recover, monitor or destroy these weapons ensured that large quantities were diverted into illicit circulation. Rather than disappearing with the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, many of these arms entered thriving arms bazaars that had emerged across Pakistan during the conflict. Among the most well-known were the markets of Darra Adam Khel in Kohat District, Landi Kotal in the Khyber Agency, Bara, Miranshah in North Waziristan, and Parachinar in the Kurram Agency. These markets varied in scale and specialisation. Some functioned primarily as trading centres for surplus and trafficked weapons, while others developed thriving cottage industries producing locally manufactured copies of popular firearms. Together, they formed an interconnected network through which weapons originating from diverse sources could be bought, sold, exchanged, repaired and modified.

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[15] Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", n. 2, p. 64.

Among Pakistan's illicit arms markets, Darra Adam Khel occupies a particularly prominent position. Located approximately 50 kilometres south of Peshawar in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Darra Adam Khel, which takes its name from the Adam Khel clan of the Pashtun Afridi tribe native to this region, has been renowned for its gunsmithing tradition since the early twentieth century. The town gained prominence during the colonial period for producing craft-assembled replicas of a wide range of firearms, commonly referred to as 'Khyber Pass' weapons, which were sold at prices considerably lower than their original counterparts.[16] Over time, Darra Adam Khel emerged as one of the world's largest centres of illicit arms production and trade. The Soviet–Afghan War provided a major impetus to this growth, as the increased demand for weapons transformed local firearms manufacturing from a small-scale artisanal activity into a flourishing commercial enterprise.

Local arms traders estimated that the industry had reached its peak during the Soviet-Afghan War, when nearly 5,000 shops throughout FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) were involved in the weapons trade. With the end of the conflict and the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the number of such establishments reportedly declined markedly. According to a 2001 study by the National Institute of Public Administration, Lahore, Darra Adam Khel contained around 2,600 outlets engaged in the manufacture, repair and sale of firearms, employing over 30,000 workers, of whom approximately 8,000 were skilled artisans.[17] The arms industry in Darra Adam Khel developed the capacity to manufacture and trade in a wide variety of weapons, including daggers, Colt and Webley handguns, Lee-Enfield rifles, replicas of M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles, Italian Beretta, German Walther and Chinese TT pistols, alongside 12-bore shotguns, repeaters, submachine guns and light anti-aircraft guns. The availability of heavier

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16 Noman Hossain, "Unregulated Firearms Trade Sparks Security Concerns in Pakistan", *The Khama Press News Agency*, June 7, 2024, at https://www.khaama.com/unregulated-firearms-trade-sparks-security-concerns-in-pakistan/?utm_source. Aqab Malik, "Darra Adam Khel 'Home Grown' Weapons", n. 8, p. 74.

17 Ibid, p. 76.

military equipment, such as landmines and RPG-7 rocket launchers, further reinforced the town's reputation as a major centre of illicit SALW production and trafficking in Pakistan.[18]

The legacy of the Afghan jihad extended far beyond Pakistan's borders. The vast stockpiles of weapons that accumulated during the conflict not only intensified sectarian, ethnic and criminal violence within Pakistan but also became integrated into overlapping networks involving state agencies, private intermediaries and illicit arms markets.[19] As the boundaries between covert assistance and commercial trafficking grew increasingly blurred, Pakistan emerged as a principal hub in the regional circulation of SALW. The repercussions of this transformation were soon felt in India, where these same networks facilitated the movement of Afghan-war weaponry to Sikh militants in Punjab and subsequently, to militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir.

Pakistan and the Arming of Sikh and Kashmiri Militancy

Indian security agencies have consistently maintained that Pakistan, particularly the ISI, played an important role in facilitating the supply of arms to Sikh militant groups operating in Punjab. The covert infrastructure established during the anti-Soviet jihad, together with the vast quantities of weapons that accumulated within Pakistan during the 1980s, provided the materiel basis for such support. Although the extent of direct ISI involvement in individual transfers remains difficult to establish, available evidence suggests that militant organisations benefited from networks that functioned with the knowledge, acquiescence, or active assistance of Pakistan's security establishment.

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[18] Ibid, p. 75.

[19] Jessica Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture", *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (6), November/ December 2000, pp. 115–126. Malik Qasim Mustafa, "Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons: Case Study - South Asia", *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 36–37.

Human Rights Watch identified three principal sources from which Sikh militants obtained their weapons within Pakistan: residual stockpiles from the Afghan arms pipeline, Pakistan's frontier arms bazaars and Afghan Mujahideen groups.[20] These channels, however, were not independent of one another. The majority of the weapons circulating through Pakistan's illicit markets had themselves originated from the CIA-ISI-administered supply programme to the Afghan Mujahideen. As discussed previously, weak oversight, deliberate diversion, battlefield leakages and private sales by Afghan commanders ensured that substantial quantities of these arms entered commercial circulation.

The composition of the arsenals recovered from Sikh militants lends considerable support to this assessment. Chinese Type 56 assault rifles overwhelmingly dominated the weapons seized by Indian security forces. Since the Type 56 constituted one of the principal weapons supplied to the Afghan resistance during the 1980s, its prevalence among Sikh militant groups strongly suggests that the Afghan pipeline spilled over into the Punjab militancy. The recovery of unmarked Kalashnikov variants further indicates that some weapons originated from Pakistan's frontier workshops, particularly those clustered around Darra Adam Khel.[21] While Sikh militants may have purchased weapons from private dealers operating in these bazaars, it is difficult to envisage large-scale procurement and cross-border movement without at least tacit support from Pakistani authorities. Even ostensibly commercial transactions appear to have been facilitated through networks linked to the ISI. Certain groups within the Sikh militants reportedly received weapons directly from Afghan Mujahideen. Consequently, the distinction between state-sponsored transfers and market-based procurement was often

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[20] Suneel Kumar, "Sikh Ethnic Uprising in India and Involvement of Foreign Powers", *Faultlines*, 18, January 2007, at https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume18/Article4.htm.

[21] "India Arms and Abuses in Indian Punjab and Kashmir", *Human Rights Watch*, 6 (10), September 1994, p. 12, at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA949.PDF. Also, see Aqab Malik, "Darra Adam Khel 'Home Grown' Weapons", n. 8, p. 76.

blurred, as both channels ultimately drew upon the same reservoir of Afghan-war weaponry and operated within an environment shaped by Pakistan's strategic objectives.

Pakistan's support to militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir appears to have evolved into a more organised and institutionalised enterprise during the 1990s. Several accounts suggest that the ISI played a pivotal role in providing arms, training, financing and logistical assistance to insurgent organisations operating in the Valley, although the intensity of this support fluctuated in response to international pressures. Reports citing serving and retired Pakistani military officials indicate that direct assistance was temporarily reduced in 1993 following American pressure and concerns that Pakistan might be designated a state sponsor of terrorism. The removal of ISI chief Lt. Gen. Javed Nasir reportedly formed part of this effort. However, rather than representing a complete cessation of support, these measures appear to have reflected a strategic recalibration. Assistance was allegedly channelled through private organisations operated by retired military and intelligence personnel, before being resumed in early 1994 under a more clandestine and professionally managed framework coordinated by the ISI and the Field Intelligence Unit.[22]

The sources of weapons available to Kashmiri militants closely resembled those observed in Punjab. Residual Afghan-war stockpiles retained by the ISI, Pakistan's frontier arms markets and transnational militant linkages all contributed to sustaining the insurgency. Leaders of Kashmiri organisations acknowledged that weapons were procured from Pakistan's tribal areas, although many of these arms had themselves originated from the Afghan jihad. The predominance of Chinese Type 56-1 folding-stock rifles, pistols, stick grenades, Type 69 rocket-propelled grenades and other military-grade weapons among militants' inventories strongly indicates the diversion of consignments originally intended for the Afghan resistance.[23]

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[22] "India Arms and Abuses in Indian Punjab and Kashmir", n. 21, p. 14–16.

[23] Ibid, p. 18.

The economics of the trade also suggest the existence of organised support mechanisms. Contemporary accounts noted that the price of AK-series rifles in Kashmir was often lower than prevailing rates in frontier arms markets, implying that commercial profit was not the primary motivation behind these transfers.[24] Rather, the availability of extensive residual stockpiles and the apparent insulation of these transactions from ordinary market forces point to facilitation through networks associated with Pakistan's security establishment. Although precise estimates of the volume of arms entering Jammu and Kashmir remain difficult to verify, the scale of recoveries by Indian security forces points to a well-established supply network. During the early years of the insurgency, thousands of AK-series assault rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades, mines, explosives and communication equipment were recovered from militant groups.[25] Official statements further reported the seizure of substantial quantities of military-grade weapons from consignments intercepted along the Line of Control.

The movement of these weapons relied upon organised infiltration corridors exploiting the difficult terrain of the India–Pakistan border. Most consignments reportedly entered through the western sector of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly via passes such as Haji Pir and Tosha before proceeding towards Baramulla and Srinagar.[26] Indian authorities identified dozens of infiltration routes across the Line of Control, suggesting that arms smuggling depended upon sophisticated logistical networks rather than isolated attempts.

These routes were not confined to Kashmir. Additional supply corridors reportedly emerged across the Thar Desert linking Pakistani Punjab with Rajasthan. Taking advantage of seasonal sandstorms and employing criminal intermediaries, including narcotics smugglers,

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[24] Ibid, p. 17.

[25] Ibid, p. 18. Mark Tully, "The Arms Trade and Political Instability in South Asia", *Strategic Analysis*, 18 (3), June 1995, p. 330.

[26] Ibid, p. 19.

weapons were allegedly transported through staging points in Pakistan before crossing into India. Sikh militants similarly infiltrated through multiple points along the international border in Jammu, Punjab and Rajasthan.[27] The recurrence of such incidents underscores the adaptability and resilience of the cross-border networks responsible for sustaining insurgent violence in India.

Persistence of Cross-Border Arms Trafficking Along the Western Borders

Although the large-scale flow of weapons associated with the Sikh and Kashmir militancy of the 1980s and early 1990s has declined, the western border with Pakistan continues to remain an important route for the entry of illicit weapons into India. In recent years, security agencies have repeatedly intercepted consignments of pistols, assault rifles, ammunition, grenades and explosives along the Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir sectors. These recoveries indicate that cross-border arms trafficking networks remain active, even though their methods have evolved in response to enhanced border surveillance and security measures. Rather than relying solely on traditional infiltration routes, smugglers increasingly employ drones, local facilitators and organised criminal networks to move weapons across the border.[28]

In Jammu and Kashmir, security agencies continue to recover foreign-origin weapons from militant groups and cross-border smuggling networks. These include AK-series rifles, pistols, grenades, explosives and other military-grade equipment. Investigations into recent cases have pointed to the involvement of handlers operating from across the border who coordinate the movement of weapons, narcotics and

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[27] Ibid, p. 14.

[28] Over the years there have been numerous news reports of Border Security Force, Punjab Police and Jammu & Kashmir Police on arms seizures and cross-border trafficking networks.

funds through local contacts and overground networks.[29] Although improved border fencing, surveillance systems and counter-infiltration operations have reduced the scale of physical infiltration, attempts to move weapons into the region remain a persistent challenge.

Punjab has emerged as a particularly important entry point for contemporary arms smuggling. A series of operations conducted by the Border Security Force (BSF) and Punjab Police in recent years has resulted in the recovery of significant quantities of foreign-made pistols, assault rifles, magazines and ammunition. In one operation near the India–Pakistan border, security forces seized a consignment containing multiple pistols and an AK-47 rifle believed to have been smuggled from across the border. In other cases, police dismantled networks involved in receiving, storing and distributing weapons that had entered India through clandestine channels.[30] These seizures indicate that smuggled weapons are not intended solely for terrorist groups but also for organised criminal networks operating in Punjab and neighbouring states.

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[29] "NIA Probes Drone-Based Arms Smuggling Across India-Pakistan Border", *Greater Jammu*, New Delhi, 6 April, at https://greaterjammu.com/nia-probes-drone-based-arms-smuggling-across-india-pakistan-border/. "Security Tightened Along IB and LoC in Jammu and Kashmir amid Smuggling Concerns," *Akashvani News*, January 11, 2026, at https://newsonair.gov.in/security-tightened-along-ib-and-loc-in-jammu-and-kashmir-amid-smuggling-concerns/.

[30] IANS, "In 152 Days, Punjab Police Recover 713 Illegal Arms", *MENAFN*, Chandigarh, June 23, 2026, at https://menafn.com/1111301320/In-152-Days-Punjab-Police-Recover-713-Illegal-Arms. "Punjab Police busts cross-border narco-arms smuggling module by apprehending its 4 operatives in Amritsar", *News on AIR*, January 27, 2026, at https://newsonair.gov.in/punjab-police-busts-cross-border-narco-arms-smuggling-module-by-apprehending-its-4-operatives-in-amritsar/. PTI, "Cross border illegal arms-drug smuggling module busted in Amritsar", *The Hindu*, Chandigarh, June 4, 2026, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/punjab/cross-border-illegal-arms-drug-smuggling-module-busted-in-amritsar/article71058566.ece.

One of the most significant changes in recent years has been the growing use of drones for cross-border smuggling. Security agencies have reported numerous cases in which drones were used to transport weapons, ammunition, narcotics and cash from across the border into Indian territory. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles allows traffickers to bypass many traditional security measures and reduces the risks associated with human couriers.[31] Recent reports indicate that Pakistan-based smuggling networks are increasingly using satellite-enabled drones to transport arms, ammunition and narcotics into Punjab. Unlike conventional drones, these platforms can operate over longer distances and are more difficult to detect or disrupt, posing a growing challenge to existing border surveillance.[32]

Another important trend is the growing overlap between arms trafficking, narcotics smuggling and illicit financial networks. Investigations in both Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir have uncovered networks involved simultaneously in the movement of weapons, drugs and money. In several instances, the recovery of narcotics has led investigators to arms-trafficking networks, while weapons seizures have exposed links to hawala operators and cross-border drug syndicates.[33] This convergence has strengthened the resilience of trafficking networks by allowing them to use the same routes, intermediaries and logistical infrastructure for multiple illegal activities. Profits generated from narcotics trafficking can also be used to finance the procurement and movement of weapons, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two activities.

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[31] "Unstarred Question No. 3042: Use of Drones for Delivery of Ammunition", *Rajya Sabha*, March 22, 2022, at https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/178/AU3042.pdf?source=pqals. "Smuggling of Arms and Narcotics", *Press Information Bureau*, Delhi, March 28, 2023, at https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1911737&reg=48&lang=2.

[32] Ravinder Vasudeva, "Satellite-linked drones rise as latest threat to Punjab's border armour", *Hindustan Times*, Chandigarh, June 23, 2026, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/satellitelinked-drones-rise-as-latest-threat-to-punjab-s-border-armour-101782153320501.html.

Recent investigations also indicate that cross-border arms trafficking relies on organised networks operating within India. Weapons entering through the border are often received by local facilitators who arrange their storage, transportation and distribution to criminal and extremist groups. The increasing use of drones has strengthened these networks by allowing weapons, ammunition and explosives to be delivered directly to designated receivers while reducing the risk of interception. Investigations by the NIA into the 2022 Jammu drone arms-drop case uncovered a network involving Pakistan-based handlers and local operatives responsible for receiving and distributing consignments containing pistols, ammunition, grenades and explosives.[34] Similar findings emerged from an NIA probe in 2026, which revealed the involvement of Pakistan-based handlers and Indian operatives in coordinating the receipt and movement of drone-dropped arms and explosives intended for terrorist activities in Punjab, Delhi and other parts of the country.[35] These cases show how cross-border trafficking networks are increasingly combining drone technology with local distribution channels to move weapons beyond border regions and into wider criminal and militant networks within India.

While external sources, particularly cross-border trafficking networks operating through Pakistan, Myanmar and other neighbouring countries, have contributed significantly to the proliferation of illicit weapons in India, they represent only one dimension of the problem. A substantial proportion of illicit arms and ammunition also originates from within

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[33] PTI, "How Punjab Police Uncovered a Major Arms and Hawala Network", *Rediff.com*, June 8, 2026, at https://m.rediff.com/news/report/punjab-police-busts-illegal-arms-smuggling-hawala-network/20260608.htm.

[34] "Jammu Drone Arms Drop Case: NIA Chargesheets Tenth Accused", *The Hindu*, May 15, 2024, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jammu-drone-arms-drop-case-nia-chargesheets-tenth-accused/article68179400.ece.

[35] Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, "NIA Probes Drone-Based Arms Smuggling Across India-Pakistan Border," *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, 7 April 2026, https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/nia-probes-drone-based-arms-smuggling-across-india-pakistan-border-prnt/cid/2154926.

the country. These include illegal manufacturing centres, traditional gunsmith communities, locally produced improvised weapons, and the diversion of arms, ammunition and explosives from legitimate production and distribution systems. Leakages from ordnance factories, security force armouries, licensed dealers and civilian stockpiles have, on occasion, enabled military-grade weapons and factory-manufactured ammunition to enter illicit markets. Together, these sources have created a parallel supply network that enables criminal groups, insurgents and other non-state actors to acquire firearms and munitions without relying exclusively on cross-border smuggling. The following chapter examines these domestic sources of illicit weapons and their contribution to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in India.

Chapter III

Illegal Manufacturing and Diversion from Legal Sources

Firearms enter illicit markets in India through two principal domestic channels: unlicensed manufacture and diversion from legal sources. Unlicensed manufacture involves the production of firearms outside the authorised system, often through small, concealed workshops using locally available materials and traditional gunsmithing skills. Diversion occurs when legally manufactured or legally held firearms move into unauthorised possession through theft, unauthorised sale, corruption or weaknesses in inventory and regulatory controls. The two processes differ in their sources and methods, but both contribute to the availability of firearms for criminal and other unlawful activities.

Illegal Manufacturing of Firearms

India has a vast network of clandestine manufacturing units, illicit workshops, local gunsmiths, criminal intermediaries and trafficking syndicates that produce, modify and distribute firearms outside the regulatory framework. These weapons range from crude country-made firearms, popularly known as *desi kattas*, to sophisticated replicas of factory-produced pistols and rifles. The domestic illegal arms industry thrives on a combination of factors, including persistent demand from criminal groups, insurgent organisations, political actors, private militias and individuals seeking unlicensed weapons. The relatively low cost of production, availability of raw materials and difficulties in monitoring thousands of small-scale workshops have enabled the proliferation of illegal firearms across several regions of the country. Consequently, domestically manufactured weapons have become an important component of India's illicit arms ecosystem, complementing and, in some cases, substituting foreign-sourced weapons.

Several regional hubs have emerged as prominent centres of illegal arms production and distribution. In northern India, Uttar Pradesh, particularly Meerut and neighbouring districts, have long been

associated with the manufacture and trafficking of country-made firearms. Madhya Pradesh hosts a number of clandestine production centres, notably in the Chambal region and districts such as Khargone, Barwani and Dhar, where gunsmithing has historically flourished. In eastern India, Munger's well-established artisanal firearm industry supplies weapons to criminal networks and Maoists across multiple states. In the Northeast, Manipur occupies a distinctive position, where locally manufactured weapons coexist with trafficked arms from Southeast Asia, often feeding insurgent and criminal networks. Together, these regional markets form interconnected supply chains that facilitate the circulation of illicit small arms across India, posing enduring challenges to law enforcement and internal security agencies.

Among the numerous centres of illicit firearm production in India, Umarti in Madhya Pradesh, Munger in Bihar and Manipur stand out as important hubs whose activities exemplify the broader dynamics of the country's domestic illegal arms market. The three case studies of Umarti in Madhya Pradesh, Munger in Bihar, and Manipur—were selected to examine different trajectories of domestic illicit firearms production in India. All three have a history of traditional metalworking and weapons-making skills, but these skills have evolved under different circumstances. In Umarti and Munger, traditional arms-making communities' ancestral metalworking skills are criminalised as private gun-making is prohibited under contemporary Indian firearm licensing frameworks. As legal jobs dried up and alternative ways to earn a living remained scarce, artisans turned to making and repairing illegal firearms simply to survive. Manipur, by contrast, illustrates how traditional blacksmithing and indigenous weapons-making knowledge has been adapted to meet the demands of a contemporary conflict, resulting in the production of locally made or improvised weapons. The cases, therefore, help examine how inherited technical knowledge, socio-economic conditions, changing demand, conflict and wider illicit networks interact to sustain domestic weapons production.

The study uses a qualitative comparative approach, examining the history and transmission of weapons-making skills, socio-economic conditions, types and techniques of production, organisation and distribution, links with wider illicit markets, and law-enforcement responses, drawing on government records, parliament questions, academic research and credible media sources.

Case Study: Umarti (Sikligar)

The village of Umarti in Barwani district of Madhya Pradesh has, over time, emerged as an important domestic hubs of illegal small arms manufacturing in India. Located in a remote and semi-forested region, Umarti became nationally visible after a series of firearm seizures in Maharashtra were traced back to weapons manufactured in the village. Investigations by the Pune Police in 2025 revealed that multiple pistols recovered in criminal cases bore links to what officers informally referred to as 'Umarti Sikligar Arms (USA)', reflecting the village's growing reputation as a source of country-made firearms.[1] The continuing links between Umarti and firearm-related offences in Maharashtra were highlighted again in July 2026, when more than 400 police personnel from Jalgaon, Nashik and Dhule conducted simultaneous searches at 45 locations in the village to trace an illegal arms network supplying firearms to Maharashtra. The operation resulted in the seizure of country-made pistols, live cartridges, raw materials, tools and moulds allegedly used for firearm manufacture.[2]

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1 "Pune Cops Bust Major Inter-State Illegal Arms Racket; 36 Held, 50 Weapon Furnaces Destroyed In Joint Operation With MP Police", *Free Press Journal*, Pune, November 23, 2025, at https://www.freepressjournal.in/pune/pune-cops-bust-major-inter-state-illegal-arms-racket-36-held-50-weapon-furnaces-destroyed-in-joint-operation-with-mp-police-video. Also see, Chandan Haygunde, "'USA', as in 'Umarti Sikligar Arms': An MP village in the shadow of the gun, now aiming for change", *The Indian Express*, Madhya Pradesh, December 27, 2025, at https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/usa-as-in-umarti-sikligar-arms-an-mp-village-in-the-shadow-of-the-gun-10440976/.

2 Santosh Sonawane, "400 Nashik cops raid 45 locations in Madhya Pradesh village to trace illegal network supplying firearms in Maharashtra", *The Times of India*, Nashik, July 21, 2026, at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/132543610.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Also see, ETV Bharat English Team, "Maharashtra: Cops Conduct Major Op In MP To Crackdown On Illegal Arms Network; Pistols, Ammo, 32 Vehicles Seized", *ETV Bharat*, Jalgaon, July 21, 2026, at https://www.etvbharat.com/en/state/maharashtra-jalgaon-police-conduct-major-operation-in-mp-to-crackdown-on-illegal-arms-network-pistols-ammo-32-motorcycles-seized-enn26072107129.

The Sikligar community, traditionally known for its skills in metalwork and gunsmithing, is spread across parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab. According to community leaders, there are around 35,000 Sikligars in Madhya Pradesh. Many of them originally lived in Punjab and Rajasthan but migrated to western Madhya Pradesh after Independence, when private arms manufacturing was declared illegal. They settled mainly in areas along the Narmada River and took up farming as their primary occupation. However, a section of the community residing in villages across Khargone, Khandwa, Barwani, Burhanpur and Dhar districts continued to utilise their traditional gunsmithing skills.[3] In places such as Umarti, these skills gradually evolved into the clandestine manufacture of illegal firearms. Small, family-run workshops operating from homes and concealed locations produced country-made pistols and modified weapons using basic tools and improvised furnaces. The decentralised nature of production, coupled with the involvement of family networks, made detection difficult and allowed illicit firearm manufacturing to persist despite periodic law-enforcement action.

The scale of the problem became clearer during 'Operation Umarti', a crackdown carried out in November 2025, when police teams from Pune, Jalgaon, and Barwani conducted joint operations in the village. Dozens of illegal manufacturing units were dismantled, kilns used for forging weapon components were destroyed, and several individuals were detained. Investigations suggested that weapons produced in Umarti were transported across state borders, particularly into Maharashtra, but also to Rajasthan, Punjab, and Gujarat. Investigations revealed a technologically enabled illicit arms ecosystem, with workshops producing large quantities of country-made pistols branded as 'USA'. The network allegedly exploited encrypted messaging and social media platforms, including Telegram, Signal and Instagram for marketing

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[3] Shruti Tomar, "Illegal arms business: MP's Sikligar community under police gaze", *Hindustan Times*, Bhopal, July 21, 2021, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/illegal-arms-business-mp-s-sikligar-community-under-police-gaze-101627329521505.html.

and customer outreach.[4] The July 2026 operation further demonstrated the continuing scale and geographical reach of this network, with Maharashtra police pursuing suspects and firearms-related cases back to multiple locations in Umarti.

The gun manufactures in Umarti employ dead-drop delivery techniques to evade law-enforcement detection. In such deliveries, the distribution network rely on intermediaries who place orders, collect consignments and transport parts in concealed batches to avoid detection. Operational patterns revealed adaptive methods. Rather than stockpiling large quantities of finished weapons, manufacturers often produced components separately and assembled firearms on demand. Parts were hidden or buried to reduce the risk of seizure. In some cases, cartridges recovered alongside these weapons raised questions about the sourcing of ammunition, suggesting possible leakages or parallel supply channels. Such practices indicate an organised but flexible production and supply chain capable of responding quickly to market demand from criminal networks.

Importantly, the illicit arms trade in Umarti appears to be driven largely by criminal demand rather than ideological motivations.[5] Weapons traced to the village were linked to gang violence, contract killings and extortion-related offences in urban centres such as Pune. This highlights a key feature of India's domestic small arms ecosystem: rural production hubs feeding urban criminal markets. While community representatives have argued that only a small fraction of residents are involved and that many families rely on agriculture or legitimate livelihoods, law-enforcement agencies have identified the village as a recurring source

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4 Soumitra Bose, "Umarti central India's major pistol hub, illegal arms marketed via Telegram, Insta", *The Times of India*, Nagpur, May 21, 2026, at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/131235086.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

5 "STF nabs man with 8 pistols, Sikligar arms smuggling racket busted in Rudrapur," *The Times of India*, Dehradun, July 24, 2025, at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/122886989.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

of illegal firearms over several years.[6] The involvement of police forces from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh in repeated operations also indicates that the problem extends beyond the village itself and involves supply links across state boundaries.

The Umarti case illustrates broader trends in India's domestic illicit arms landscape. First, it demonstrates how decentralised, small-scale manufacturing can sustain a steady supply of low-cost firearms independent of cross-border smuggling. Second, it shows the interstate character of illegal arms distribution, where weapons move fluidly across jurisdictions, complicating enforcement. Third, it reveals how localised production can have national-level security implications by increasing the lethality of organised crime in major cities.

Case Study: Munger

Munger district in Bihar has long been regarded as one of India's most significant centres of illicit small-arms manufacturing. Unlike many illegal arms markets that rely primarily on smuggling networks, Munger represents a mature and self-sustaining production hub, where historical gunsmithing traditions, skilled labour, established trafficking routes and persistent market demand have combined to create a resilient underground arms economy. The district's significance extends beyond Bihar, as weapons manufactured in Munger have repeatedly been traced to criminal networks operating across northern, eastern and central India.[7]

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[6] Anurag Dwary, "'Can't Die of Hunger': Poverty Ammo for Madhya Pradesh Illegal Arms Belt", *NDTV*, Bhopal, September 24, 2024, at https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/sikligar-community-madhya-pradesh-exclusive-in-madhya-pradesh-hinterland-a-300-year-old-gunmaking-journey-4418994.

[7] "Starred Question No. 5: Illegal Arms Seized by Delhi Police", *Rajya Sabha*, New Delhi, February 24, 2016, at https://xn—i1b5bzbybhfo5c8b4bxh.xn—11b7cb3a6a.xn—h2brj9c/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2016-pdfs/rs-240216/5.pdf.

The roots of Munger's association with firearms can be traced to the eighteenth century, when Nawab Mir Qasim established military production facilities in the region and encouraged the settlement of skilled artisans. Over time, Munger developed a reputation as a centre of gunsmithing and metalwork, a tradition that survived both colonial rule and Independence. Following independence, the district emerged as one of India's most important centres of licensed firearm manufacturing. However, stricter arms regulations, declining demand for licensed weapons and the gradual closure of legal manufacturing units created a pool of highly skilled but underemployed gunsmiths. Rather than disappearing, this technical expertise increasingly migrated into informal and illegal channels, laying the foundations for the emergence of a large-scale clandestine arms industry.[8]

The transition from legal to illegal production was reinforced by socio-economic factors. Investigative reports suggest that in several villages of Munger, particularly along the Ganga river belt, firearm production became embedded within the local economy. Entire communities became involved in different stages of the trade, ranging from manufacturing and assembly to transportation and distribution. In many cases, gunsmithing represented a hereditary occupation passed down through generations, making the illicit arms economy not merely a criminal enterprise but also a source of livelihood. The decline of the legal firearms sector therefore did not eliminate the district's manufacturing capabilities; instead, it redirected them into an underground market sustained by established social networks and specialised skills.[9]

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[8] Amarnath Tewary, "The Changing Face of Munger's Gun Trade," *The Hindu*, December 16, 2017, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-changing-face-of-mungers-gun-trade/article21740314.ece.

[9] Santosh Singh, "Munger's Smoking Guns: Bihar Town Turns into Illegal Weapons Hub," *The Indian Express*, June 16, 2013, at https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/latest-news/mungers-smoking-guns-bihar-town-turns-into-illegal-weapons-hub/.

Over time, the character of production evolved considerably. While earlier illegal workshops were primarily associated with the manufacture of crude country-made firearms, producers gradually acquired the capability to manufacture more sophisticated pistols, revolvers and carbines. Law-enforcement agencies have repeatedly recovered weapons bearing markings such as 'Only for Army Supply', reflecting attempts by manufacturers to increase the perceived value and marketability of their products.[10] This technological adaptation enabled Munger's producers to cater to a wider clientele and compete with trafficked firearms originating from outside the country.

The operational structure of the industry has also contributed to its longevity. Unlike large centralised factories, Munger's illicit arms economy functions through a decentralised network of small workshops scattered across villages, agricultural fields, forested areas and riverine settlements. Such workshops frequently shift locations in response to law-enforcement pressure, making detection and disruption difficult. Investigations over the past decade have uncovered manufacturing units concealed in mustard fields, village homes, wooded areas and isolated settlements. More recently, law-enforcement agencies uncovered an underground arms-manufacturing facility hidden beneath a seemingly legitimate industrial unit in Tarapur, indicating increasing sophistication in concealment techniques and operational security.[11]

The district's geography has further facilitated the persistence of illegal production. The extensive riverine terrain along the Ganga provides numerous opportunities for concealment, transportation and rapid relocation of manufacturing units. This geographical advantage, combined with decentralised production methods, allows the industry to absorb enforcement pressures and reconstitute itself even after major

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[10] Amarnath Tewary, "The Changing Face of Munger's Gun Trade," n. 8.

[11] Dwaipayan Ghosh, "Kolkata STF Uncovers Secret Arms Factory in Munger, 14th Illegal Unit Busted," *The Times of India*, Kolkata, November 14, 2024, at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/115304205.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

police operations. Consequently, periodic raids and arrests have had limited long-term impact on the overall structure of the illicit arms market.[12]

Another important dimension of Munger's illegal arms economy is its connection with broader criminal and insurgent networks. Several police investigations have linked clandestine manufacturing units to individuals associated with Maoist organisations. During special operations against Maoists, Bihar's Special Task Force (STF) uncovered a number of illegal gun factories operating in forested areas. Raids resulted in the recovery of firearms, unfinished weapons, machinery and ammunition components, while several suspects with alleged insurgent links were arrested.[13] Although the primary market for Munger-made firearms remains criminal networks, these incidents demonstrate that localised illegal production can also intersect with insurgent infrastructures when opportunities and incentives align.

The reach of Munger's arms industry extends well beyond Bihar. Numerous investigations have revealed interstate trafficking networks connecting the district to markets in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Odisha. In several cases, weapons components and firearms seized in other states were traced back to manufacturers and suppliers operating in Munger.[14] Such cases illustrate that the district functions not merely as a local manufacturing centre but as an important node within a wider national network of illicit arms distribution.

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[12] Santosh Singh, "Munger's Smoking Guns: Bihar Town Turns into Illegal Weapons Hub," n. 9.

[13] Avinash Kumar, "Bihar police bust Maoist gun factory in Munger, probe supply links", *Hindustan Times*, February 22, 2021, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bihar-police-bust-maoist-gun-factory-in-munger-probe-supply-links-101613994592364.html. OpIndia Staff, "Munger: Condemned weapons of Army smuggled to Maoists, one more smuggler arrested", *OpIndia*, December 2, 2018, at https://www.opindia.com/2018/12/munger-condemned-weapons-of-army-smuggled-to-maoists-one-more-smuggler-arrested/.

[14] Dwaipayan Ghosh, "Kolkata STF Uncovers Secret Arms Factory in Munger, 14th Illegal Unit Busted," n. 11. "Starred Question No. 5: Illegal Arms Seized by Delhi Police", n. 7.

The persistence of Munger's illegal arms industry despite decades of enforcement efforts highlights the structural nature of the challenge. Repeated raids have resulted in the seizure of thousands of firearms, weapon components and manufacturing tools, while numerous workshops have been dismantled. Yet the industry continues to regenerate because the underlying drivers remain intact such as a deep reservoir of technical expertise, entrenched social networks, economic incentives, favourable geography and sustained demand from criminal markets. This capacity for adaptation and regeneration distinguishes Munger from many other illegal arms-producing regions in India.

Thus, Munger represents far more than a local law-and-order problem. It constitutes one of the most durable production centres within India's illicit small-arms ecosystem, supplying weapons that contribute to organised crime, armed violence and, on occasion, insurgent activity. The district's continued ability to manufacture and distribute firearms despite sustained law-enforcement pressure demonstrates the limitations of approaches focused solely on policing and interdiction. As long as the socio-economic foundations of the industry remain intact and demand for illegal firearms persists, Munger is likely to continue functioning as a critical node in India's domestic illicit arms market and a significant internal security concern.

Case Study: Pumpi Guns in Manipur

The ethnic conflict that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 revealed a distinct weapon that has become closely associated with armed mobilisation of Kuki-Zo community in the hill districts, popularly known as 'pumpi' or 'bambi' guns. Pumpi guns encompass a range of improvised systems, including mortar-like launchers, light cannons, projectile launchers and shoulder-fired devices. Their calibre, firing mechanism, range and accuracy vary significantly depending on the expertise of the manufacturer and the materials available.[15]

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[15] Monalisa Hazarika and Henrique Garbino, "Manipur's 'Pumpi Guns:' Why Should We Care About Them?", *Forum on the Arms Trade*, November 12, 2024, at https://www.forumarmstrade.org/blog/manipurs-pumpi-guns-why-should-we-care-about-them.

Nevertheless, the underlying principle remains consistent—the conversion of commonly available industrial materials into weapons capable of delivering explosive or fragmentation effects over considerable distances

Although less sophisticated than military-grade artillery systems, their widespread deployment illustrates how local communities can adapt traditional knowledge, readily available materials and indigenous manufacturing capabilities to meet contemporary military requirements. Historical accounts trace their origins to anti-colonial resistance movements against the British during the early twentieth century when Kuki-Zo relied on improvised firearms and projectile-launching devices because of limited access to industrial weapons. Over time, the knowledge required to construct such weapons survived within local communities and was transmitted across generations.[16] Contemporary Pumpi guns are generally fabricated from easily available materials, including galvanised iron pipes, water pipes and sections of electric poles. Security agencies have repeatedly reported the recovery of such weapons during search operations in conflict-affected districts. Village blacksmiths, known locally as Thih-Kheng Pa, are often identified as key actors involved in their manufacture.[17]

Improvised weapons have historically emerged in situations where armed groups lack sustained access to commercial or military-grade armaments. Their appeal stems from three factors: accessibility, affordability and deniability. Unlike factory-produced weapons, improvised systems can be manufactured locally using readily available materials and basic engineering skills. They are also significantly cheaper than commercially produced firearms and are difficult to trace because they lack serial numbers, manufacturer markings and formal supply chains. Consequently, they provide communities and armed groups

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16 Ibid.

17 PTI, "Uprooted electric poles, galvanized iron pipes converted into weapons in Manipur hills", *The Economic Times*, July 16, 2023, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/uprooted-electric-poles-galvanized-iron-pipes-converted-into-weapons-in-manipur-hills/articleshow/101797897.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

with a means of sustaining armed resistance even when conventional weapons are scarce or heavily regulated.

In the context of Manipur, the widespread use of Pumpi guns suggests that Kuki-Zo have developed a degree of self-sufficiency in weapons production. Media reports indicate that many villages have incorporated such weapons into local defence arrangements, placing them in trenches, fortified positions and observation points overlooking contested areas. Placed in these sites, these weapons allow armed groups to engage targets at distances beyond the range of small arms. They are particularly useful in Manipur's rugged terrain, where hilltop positions overlooking valleys and transport routes provide tactical advantages. In fact, the use of Pumpi guns has contributed to the militarisation of the so-called buffer zones that separate Meitei-dominated valley areas from Kuki-Zo-dominated hill districts. The involvement of village blacksmiths and youth volunteers reinforces the perception that these weapons are collectively owned and maintained rather than controlled by a single armed organisation.[18]

Recent recoveries by security forces further highlight the operational importance of Pumpi guns in the ongoing conflict. Search operations conducted across conflict-affected districts have repeatedly yielded caches containing both improvised and conventional weapons. For instance, a search operation in Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts in July 2025 resulted in the recovery of four Pumpi guns alongside country-made rifles, pistols, a Sten-type carbine, ammunition and military equipment such as bulletproof jackets, communication devices and protective gear.[19] Such recoveries indicate that Pumpi guns are not merely auxiliary weapons but form part of a broader arsenal that includes factory-made firearms and military-grade equipment. Their coexistence with conventional weapons suggests that armed groups view them as complementary capabilities that provide stand-off firepower, particularly in terrain where direct engagement may be

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[18] Ibid.

[19] PTI, "11 firearms, war-like stores recovered in Manipur", *The Hindu*, July 4, 2025, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manipur/11-firearms-war-like-stores-recovered-in-manipur/article69771278.ece.

difficult. This hybridisation of weapon systems has contributed to the increasing militarisation of the conflict and poses additional challenges for disarmament and arms-control efforts in the state.

Another significant aspect of the phenomenon is its possible transnational dimension. Several observers have noted similarities between improvised weapons used in Manipur and those employed by anti-junta resistance groups operating across the border in Myanmar. Given the porous nature of the Indo-Myanmar border and the longstanding social, ethnic and familial linkages that connect communities on both sides, the transfer of technical knowledge, manufacturing techniques and precursor materials cannot be ruled out. While definitive evidence remains limited, reports of weapons, components, emerging technologies and manufacturing knowledge moving across the border suggest that the evolution of improvised weapons in Manipur should be viewed within a wider regional context rather than as an entirely isolated phenomenon. The continued recovery of Pumpi guns alongside conventional firearms further indicates that these weapons have become an established component of local conflict dynamics, reflecting both indigenous innovation and the adaptive nature of contemporary armed mobilisation in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands.[20]

Alongside established production centres such as Munger and traditional gunsmithing communities in central India and Manipur, western Uttar Pradesh has emerged as another significant domestic source of illicit small arms. Unlike craft-based or historically rooted manufacturing systems, the UP corridor, particularly districts such as Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur and adjoining areas, reflects a more recent and demand-driven form of production, closely linked to organised criminal networks operating in the National Capital Region and adjoining states.[21] Investigations reveal that components such as barrels,

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[20] Monalisa Hazarika and Henrique Garbino, "Manipur's 'Pumpi Guns:' Why Should We Care About Them?", n. 15.

[21] Express News Service, "Illegal arms factory, syndicate supplying weapons to gangsters in Delhi-NCR, UP, Haryana busted; 5 arrested", *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, January 17, 2026, at https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/illegal-arms-factory-syndicate-busted-5-arrested-10478663/.

frames and firing mechanisms are often sourced separately and assembled locally, indicating a fragmented production model designed to reduce detection risks. The structure of this network allows rapid relocation of manufacturing units following police raids, contributing to its resilience.[22] This supply–demand dynamic is reflected in NCRB crime statistics, which consistently record high numbers of Arms Act cases in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Delhi.

Diversion of Arms and Ammunition from State-Controlled Sources

The diversion of arms and ammunition from state-controlled sources constitutes an often-overlooked but significant source of illicit small arms and light weapons in India. While public discourse frequently focuses on cross-border trafficking and illegal domestic manufacturing, evidence from law-enforcement investigations indicates that weapons, ammunition and explosives have also leaked from government production facilities, security force armouries and licensed distribution channels. Such diversions are particularly concerning because they involve weapons and munitions that are manufactured to military specifications and are therefore generally more reliable, durable and lethal than locally fabricated alternatives.

In the mid-2000s, allegations emerged that serving and retired Army personnel had illegally sold Non-Service Pattern (NSP) weapons—firearms allotted to officers under prescribed procedures—to civilians, including individuals with criminal backgrounds. The matter eventually reached the Supreme Court through a public interest litigation in Arvind

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[22] HT Correspondent, "Azamgarh: Illegal arms manufacturing unit busted, two held", *Hindustan, Times*, Lucknow, October 28, 2022, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/azamgarh-illegal-arms-manufacturing-unit-busted-two-held-101666977575375.html. PTI, "Illegal arms factory unearthed in UP's Baghpat; 3 arrested", *The Print*, Baghpat, 17 May, 2026, https://theprint.in/india/illegal-arms-factory-unearthed-in-ups-baghpat-3-arrested/2933418/.

Kumar Sharma vs Union of India (2016).[23] The petitioner alleged that Army personnel had sold NSP weapons procured from the Central Ordnance Depot, Jabalpur, to members of the general public, including persons with criminal records and anti-social elements. During the proceedings, the Ministry of Defence informed the Supreme Court that extensive internal investigations had already been conducted and an Army Court of Inquiry had examined the role of 140 individuals, including serving officers, retired officers, civilians and family members. The inquiry found 72 officers and one Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) blameworthy for violations relating to NSP weapons. Most significantly, 26 officers and one JCO were tried and sentenced by General Court Martial for their involvement in the illegal sale of NSP weapons.[24]

Another significant case came to light in 2018 when the STF of Kolkata Police uncovered an arms-smuggling network linked to the Rifle Factory Ishapore in West Bengal. Investigators found that revolvers, a carbine and ammunition had been illegally removed from the factory with the involvement of some employees. These weapons were then supplied to Maoist groups in India and banned organisations in Nepal and criminal networks in Bihar. Subsequent investigations suggested that the racket had been operating for several years and involved the theft of weapon parts and completed firearms from one of India's oldest ordnance factories.[25] The case highlighted how even highly

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[23] "Strengthening Oversight: Supreme Court Upholds Enforcement of the Arms Act, 1959 in NSP Bore-Weapon Sales", *Casemine*, August 17, 2016, at https://www.casemine.com/commentary/in/strengthening-oversight%3A-supreme-court-upholds-enforcement-of-the-arms-act%2C-1959-in-nsp-bore-weapon-sales/view.

[24] "Sale Illegal Weapons", *Press Information Bureau*, December 12, 2014, at https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?lang=2&reg=48&relid=113226&utm_source=.

[25] Madhuparna Das, "Arms smuggled out of Ordinance factory reached Maoists and other banned outfits in India, Nepal: Police", *The Economic Times*, May 7, 2018, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/arms-smuggled-out-of-ordinance-factory-reached-maoists-and-other-banned-outfits-in-india-nepal-police/articleshow/64063846.cms?from=mdr.

secured defence production facilities can become vulnerable to insider involvement and organised criminal networks.

The diversion problem is not limited to firearms. Ammunition has also found its way into illegal markets. A police investigation of illegal arms seizures in Mumbai found that while many of the weapons recovered were country-made, most of the ammunition seized alongside them was factory-manufactured.[26] Police officials noted that tracing the source of these cartridges was often difficult. Since ammunition requires specialised machinery and controlled materials to manufacture, its presence in illegal markets points towards leakage from authorised production and distribution channels rather than large-scale illegal production.

Recent investigations point to similar weaknesses in civilian distribution channels. Bihar Police uncovered cases in which ammunition purchased legally by licensed firearm owners and authorised dealers was allegedly diverted into illegal markets.[27] These incidents reveal shortcomings in monitoring systems and record-keeping practices. Although the quantities involved in individual cases may appear limited, such leakages can cumulatively provide a steady supply of ammunition to criminal groups and illicit arms networks.

Diversion has also occurred from security force stockpiles. In 2010, authorities uncovered a network involving serving CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) personnel and retired police officials who were allegedly supplying AK-47 and INSAS rifles, along with cartridges stolen from CRPF armouries, to the Maoist groups.[28] Subsequent

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[26] Gautam S. Mengle, "Drive against illegal arms: 'Factory-Made' ammunition leaves police puzzled", *The Indian Express*, Mumbai, December 22, 2014, at https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/drive-against-illegal-arms-factory-made-ammunition-leaves-police-puzzled/.

[27] Dev Raj, "Bihar Police Detects Diversion of Ammunition from Shops and Gun Licence Owners", *ETV Bharat*, 2025.

[28] Abhishek Angad, "CRPF constable among three held for supplying 'huge' quantities of arms to Maoists", *The Indian Express*, Ranchi, November 17, 2021, at https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jharkhand-maoists-constable-arms-supply-7627466/.

investigations by the Uttar Pradesh STF revealed the involvement of personnel posted at various CRPF centres in the state and pointed to a wider system through which weapons and ammunition were being channelled to insurgent groups. Reports at the time suggested that some of the diverted ammunition may have eventually reached Maoist units involved in the April 2010 Dantewada attack, in which 75 CRPF personnel were killed.[29] The involvement of serving and former security personnel drew attention to vulnerabilities in armoury management and stockpile security. It also highlighted how insider access to government inventories can facilitate the diversion of ammunition, creating leakages that are often difficult to detect and enabling insurgent groups to maintain a steady supply of munitions.

The challenge extends beyond firearms and ammunition to include explosives and explosive accessories as well. In 2007, security agencies intercepted a large consignment of gelatine sticks, detonators and safety fuse wires linked to a production facility in Maharashtra that was allegedly being routed to Maoist networks in Jharkhand. Investigators believed that the material was sufficient to manufacture a substantial number of IEDs.[30] Similar incidents involving the theft or diversion of commercial explosives have been reported from left-wing extremism-affected areas, where insurgent groups have relied on such materials to craft landmines and improvised explosive devices.

These incidents show that diversion is a separate source of illicit weapons and ammunition in India. Unlike smuggled weapons, diverted arms originate within legal production, storage and distribution systems before entering illegal markets through theft, corruption, negligence or

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29 Rahul Pandita, "The Men Who Feed and Fight India's Maoists", *Open the Magazine*, May 6, 2010, at https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/the-men-who-feed-and-fight-indias-maoists.

30 "Maharashtra linked to explosives haul in Ranchi", *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, April 10, 2007, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/maharashtra-linked-to-explosives-haul-in-ranchi/story-a07nm6aOMGPoRmgUS0NnMP.html.

weak oversight. The problem highlights the need for stronger inventory controls, regular audits, better record-keeping and stricter monitoring of weapons and ammunition at every stage of the supply chain. Unless these weaknesses are addressed, illegal arms markets will continue to benefit from leakages within otherwise legitimate systems.

The discussion thus far shows that small arms and light weapons in India come from a variety of sources. These include arms smuggled across international borders, weapons diverted from conflict zones in neighbouring countries, international trafficking networks, illegal arms production within India, and leakages from government stockpiles. Together, these sources create a steady supply of arms that find their way into the hands of insurgents, criminal groups and other non-state actors. The widespread availability of SALW has affected India's internal security in several ways, contributing to insurgency, terrorism, organised crime and communal violence. It has also led to loss of life, displacement of people and challenges to governance and development. The next chapter examines these consequences and analyses how the proliferation of SALW has affected India's security environment.

Chapter IV

Small Arms and Light Weapons: Impact on Internal Security

Small arms and light weapons have a major impact on security across the world. Although they do not usually create conflicts on their own, they make violence easier, more frequent and more deadly where instability already exists. The easy availability of such weapons increases the likelihood of violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings. As a result, it contributes to higher levels of killings, injuries and fear among civilians. SALW are widely used in armed conflicts, organised crime and everyday interpersonal violence, making them central to current security challenges.[1] Consequently, they account for a significant proportion of violent deaths worldwide each year. In 2024, the UN recorded at least 48,000 conflict-related civilian deaths, with small arms responsible for up to 30 per cent in some contexts.[2] Their widespread availability allows terrorist groups and criminal actors to sustain violence over long periods. According to available data, SALW constituted the second most frequently used category of weapons in terrorist attacks, surpassed only by explosive devices.[3] Therefore, the main concern

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1 "Impact of small arms and light weapons on conflict, security and human development", *Small Arms and Light Weapons Module 3*, Saferworld Training Series, pp. 3–5, at https://www.saferworld-global.org/downloads/pubdocs/SALW-module-3.pdf. Roderic Alley, "Small Arms and Light Weapons: The Disjunction Problem," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(2), 2019, pp. 145, 153–154.

2 Vibhu Mishra, "Illicit weapons fuelling conflicts worldwide, officials warn", *UN News Global perspective Human stories*, November 10, 2025, at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166324.

3 "Human, Economic and Social Costs of Small Arms and Light Weapons Violence: Selected Global Data", *IANSA Briefing Paper*, May 2024, p. 8, at https://iansa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/IANSA-Briefing-Paper-Human-Costs-of-SALW-Violence-ENG.pdf.

regarding the easy availability of SALW is that, even after formal conflicts end, these weapons often remain in circulation, leading to continued violence and undermining long-term peacebuilding efforts.

SALW also create serious social and economic costs. They contribute to forced displacement, disrupt education and healthcare systems, and slow down economic development in affected regions. In addition, they increase public spending on security and impose long-term burdens on state institutions.[4] Another important impact of SALW is that they connect different forms of violence. The same weapons are often used in armed conflict, organised crime, terrorism, and local disputes. This blurs the distinction between war and crime and makes violence more difficult to control. SALW are also attractive to non-state actors because they are cheap, easy to carry and simple to use. Their accessibility ensures a constant supply of weapons to groups involved in violence, especially in weak governance environments.

As stated previously, SALW do not directly cause conflict, but they intensify existing political, ethnic, or social tensions. Once grievances exist, the availability of weapons increases the scale and duration of violence. This makes SALW a key factor in sustaining insecurity rather than simply triggering it. The persistence of such weapons also weakens trust in state institutions and reduces the ability of governments to maintain law and order.

In the Indian context, the impact of SALW is visible across multiple security challenges, including insurgency, terrorism and organised crime. In regions such as the Northeast, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and areas previously affected by left-wing extremism, the availability of small arms has played a major role in sustaining violence. These weapons have enabled non-state actors to carry out attacks, resist security operations and maintain armed networks over long periods. Even after the decline of large-scale insurgent activity in some regions, the circulation of illicit weapons continues to pose risks to public safety and internal security.

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[4] Ibid.

SALW as a Driver of Insurgency in Northeast India

While militancy and terrorism require financial resources, ideological support, recruits and organisational infrastructure to survive, access to weapons and ammunition remains one of their most fundamental necessities. The ability of an insurgent or terrorist group to procure and sustain a steady supply of arms determines its military capability to challenge the authority of the state, threaten public order and sustain prolonged armed campaigns. Military strength also enhances a group's ability to attract public attention, mobilise support and recruit new members. In Northeast India, insurgent organisations have been able to acquire weapons with relative ease through well-established illicit supply networks operating across international borders. The widespread availability of SALW has, therefore, been one of the most significant factors contributing to the persistence of insurgencies in the region. In other words, while political grievances, ethnic aspirations and demands for autonomy motivated armed movements, the easy availability of modern weapons transformed these grievances into sustained and protracted armed conflicts. Without continuous access to weapons, many insurgent groups would have found it difficult to challenge the Indian state or maintain violent campaigns over several decades.

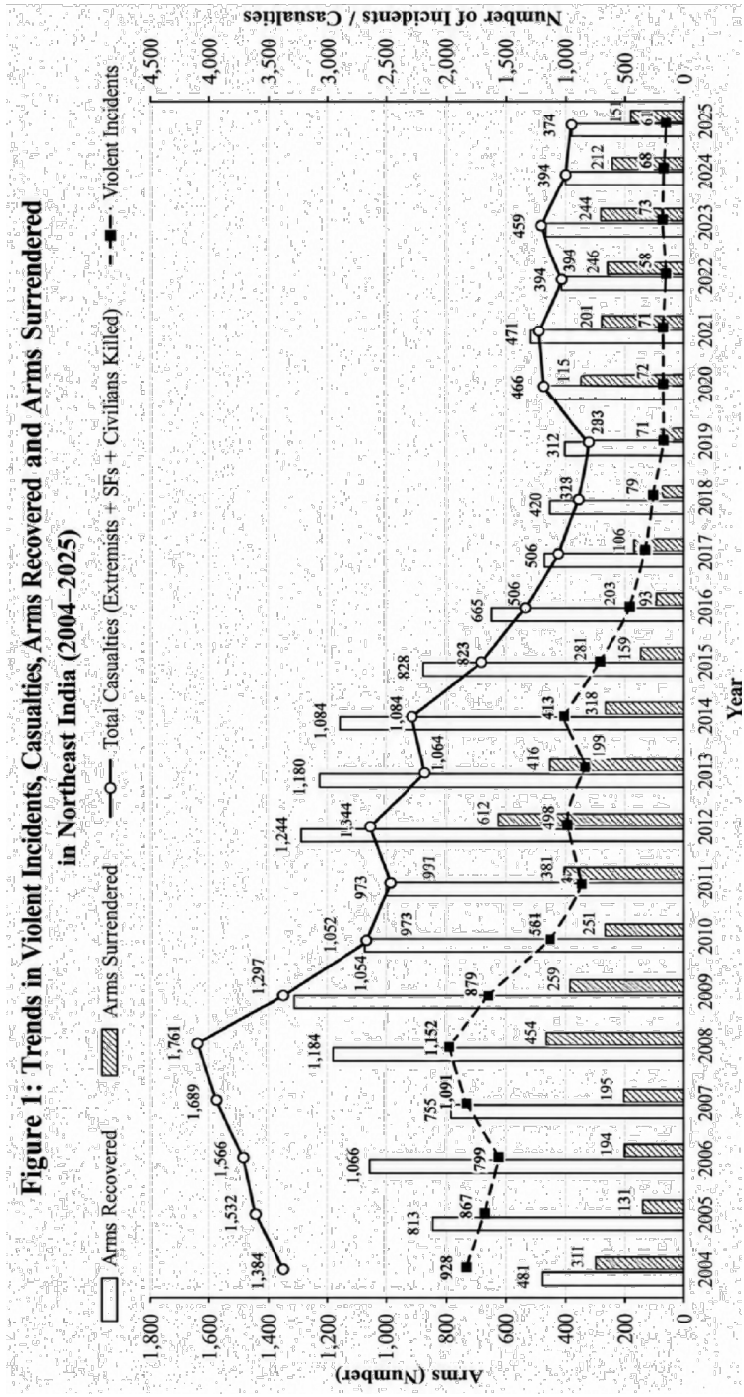
The trends presented in Figure 1 reveal a close relationship between the availability of arms and ammunition and the intensity of insurgent violence in Northeast India. Throughout the period between 2004 and 2014, when insurgent violence remained at its highest, the recovery of illegal weapons by security forces also remained consistently high. During this period, violent incidents exceeded one thousand annually on several occasions, reaching a peak of 1,561 incidents in 2008. At the same time, arms recovered increased from 481 weapons in 2004 to 1,357 weapons in 2009, while fatalities among extremists, security forces and civilians also remained high.[5] The simultaneous rise in violent incidents,

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[5] "Insurgency in North East", Northeast Division, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2026-04/NE_Insurgency_profile_23042026.pdf.

casualties and arms recoveries suggests that the availability of weapons was a critical factor sustaining insurgent activities.

Larger recoveries by security forces did not occur in isolation; rather, they reflected the existence of extensive weapon stockpiles within insurgent organisations. Similarly, the high number of casualties recorded during these years demonstrates the operational capability of these groups, which depended significantly on their access to firearms and ammunition. The gradual decline in insurgency after 2014 because of ceasefire and peace agreements with various insurgent groups was also accompanied by a corresponding reduction in arms recoveries and fatalities. Violent incidents fell from 824 in 2014 to 151 in 2025, while total casualties declined from 413 to only 33 during the same period. Although security forces continued to recover illegal weapons every year, the number of recoveries also declined considerably.



Notes: Total Casualties include Extremists Killed + Security Forces Killed + Civilians Killed.

Souces: "Insurgency in North East", Northeast Division, Ministry of Home Affairs.

At the same time, the data reveal that large numbers of arms continued to be surrendered, particularly during 2020–2023, when several insurgent groups entered peace agreements or surrendered to security forces. The surrender of 445 arms in 2020, 471 in 2021, 394 in 2022, and 459 in 2023 demonstrates that insurgent organisations still possessed a fair number of weapons even as violence declined.

The decline of insurgency did not necessarily result in the end of violence. The continued circulation of illicit SALW enabled former insurgents and armed groups to engage in organised criminal activities, thereby perpetuating insecurity even after the intensity of insurgency has diminished. In several instances, delays in the implementation of peace agreements and rehabilitation programmes have left former militants without sustainable livelihoods, prompting some to resort to kidnapping for ransom, extortion, human trafficking and other criminal activities.[6] The availability of weapons facilitated this transition from political violence to organised crime, contributing to the rise in criminal incidents in states such as Nagaland, Assam and Manipur.

For example, in Nagaland, despite the ceasefire with the Government of India, factions of the NSCN have continued to engage in violent rivalries, resulting in nearly 3,000 fratricidal clashes and the deaths of more than 1,800 cadres between 1997 and 2013.[7] The NSCN (IM) has also been repeatedly accused of running extensive extortion and kidnapping networks while maintaining armed cadres under the ceasefire arrangement.[8] As noted by the Governor of Nagaland, R. N.

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[6] "Security Situation in the North Eastern States of India", Two Hundred Thirteenth Report, Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, *Rajya Sabha*, July 19, 2018, pp. 1–2.

[7] R.N. Ravi, "Nagaland: Descent into Chaos", *The Hindu*, January 23, 2014, at https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/nagaland-descent-into-chaos/article5606432.ece.

[8] Manas Roy, "Is NSCN (IM) running extortion racket under the garb of peace process?", *Northeast Now*, September 7, 2018, at https://nenow.in/north-east-news/nscn-im-running-extortion-racket-garb-peace-process.html.

Ravi, these armed groups have established 'parallel governments' through systematic extortion and intimidation, undermining the authority and legitimacy of the state.[9] These developments demonstrate that unless illicit weapons are recovered and effective disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation measures are implemented, the end of insurgency does not necessarily translate into sustainable peace.

The spike in violent incidents and casualties in 2023 and 2024 marks a departure from the declining trend in insurgency witnessed in the region over the previous decade. This reversal was primarily driven by the outbreak of ethnic violence between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities in May 2023. However, the scale and lethality of the conflict were significantly amplified by the widespread availability of small arms and ammunition. Violent incidents increased from 201 in 2022 to 243 in 2023 and 294 in 2024, while total casualties rose from 15 in 2022 to 86 and 64, respectively.[10] Additionally, thousands of people belonging to both communities were displaced from their homes. Following the outbreak of violence, thousands of weapons and large quantities of ammunition were looted from police armouries, while additional firearms entered the conflict through illicit trafficking networks and local fabrication.[11] The widespread circulation of assault rifles, self-loading rifles, INSAS rifles, mortars, IEDs, drones and locally

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9 Vijaita Singh, "Armed gangs rule Nagaland: Governor", *The Hindu*, June 25, New Delhi, 2020, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nagaland-governor-slams-collapse-of-law-and-order-in-state/article31915402.ece.

10 "Insurgency in North East", n. 5.

11 Bikash Singh, "Manipur recovers 70% of arms looted during ethnic violence", *The Economic Times*, Guwahati, June 15, 2026, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/manipur-recovers-70-of-arms-looted-during-ethnic-violence/articleshow/131728195.cms?from=mdr. Subham Tiwari and Bidisha Saha, "Deep dive: The high-tech weapon behind Manipur bloodshed", *India Today*, New Delhi, September 12, 2024, at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-violence-high-tech-weapon-behind-bloodshed-2598549-2024-09-12.

manufactured firearms substantially increased the destructive capacity of civilian militias and armed groups. As a result, the distinction between insurgents and civilians became increasingly blurred, with heavily armed community defence groups replacing traditional insurgent organisations as the principal actors in many areas.[12]

The continued recovery of large caches of sophisticated weapons by security forces further substantiates the central role of arms availability in sustaining the conflict. Joint operations by the Army, Assam Rifles, Central Armed Police Forces and Manipur Police have repeatedly recovered assault rifles, INSAS rifles, AK-series rifles, carbines, pistols, mortars, grenades, IEDs and thousands of rounds of ammunition from different districts of the state, demonstrating that significant quantities of illegal weapons remain in circulation.[13] The experience of Manipur, therefore, reinforces the broader argument that the availability of SALW is a critical factor in the sustenance and escalation of armed conflicts. Ethnic tensions between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities provided the immediate trigger for violence, but it was the widespread availability of firearms and ammunition that transformed localised communal clashes into a prolonged and highly lethal conflict. The events in Manipur underscore that effective conflict management in Northeast India requires not only political reconciliation and inter-community dialogue but also sustained efforts to recover illicit weapons, prevent fresh inflows of arms and dismantle trafficking networks that continue to fuel violence.

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[12] Monalisa Hazarika, "How the Flow of Small Arms Helps Fuel Violence in India's Manipur … small or not, the harm they cause is large", *Inkstick*, February 28, 2024, at https://inkstickmedia.com/how-the-flow-of-small-arms-helps-fuel-violence-in-indias-manipur/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[13] Bit Irom, "Manipur: Four insurgents arrested, large cache of arms seized in joint operations", *Northeast Now*, Imphal, July 6, 2026, at https://nenow.in/north-east-news/manipur/manipur-four-insurgents-arrested-large-cache-of-arms-seized-in-joint-operations-across-manipur.html.

IMPACT OF SALW DURING PUNJAB AND KASHMIR MILITANCY

Trafficking of arms and ammunition across the western border has remained one of the most persistent security challenges for India. During the 1980s and 1990s, when militancy in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir was at its peak, Pakistan facilitated the smuggling of sophisticated weapons, explosives and ammunition through networks of smugglers, infiltrators and militant groups. Many militants also crossed the border to receive training in handling these weapons before returning to India. The steady supply of modern weapons significantly enhanced the operational capability of militant organisations, enabling them to carry out more frequent and deadlier attacks against security forces and civilians.

Militancy in Punjab

During the years of the Punjab insurgency, Sikh youths used to cross over to Pakistan to receive training in various terrorist camps set up by the ISI. Some of those camps used to be located as close as 75 metres from the international boundary. The flow of Sikh militants to these training camps picked up in 1984 following *Operation Blue Star* and increased substantially in the subsequent years.[14] Once their training was complete, these militants used to sneak back into Punjab with sophisticated arms and explosives. Between 1986 and 1992, security forces in Punjab had apprehended 45,650 persons trying to cross the international border[15] and had seized around 2500 Kalashnikov-type

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[14] K.P.S. Gill, "Endgame in Punjab: 1988-1993", *Faultline*, 1, at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume1/Fault1-kpstext.htm.

[15] Praveen Swami, "Failed Threats and Flawed Fences: India's Military Responses to Pakistan's Proxy War", *India Review*, 3 (2), 2004, p. 157.

rifles[16] from Sikh militants, all of which they claim came from Pakistan. According to Indian intelligence estimates in late 1992, Sikh militant organisations were still in possession of approximately 1,543 AK-47 rifles, 106 rocket launchers, and 112 general-purpose and light machine guns, highlighting the scale of military-grade weaponry available to the militant groups.[17]

During the early years of the Punjab insurgency, militant violence was comparatively limited in both scale and lethality. Between 1981 and 1983, militants killed 101 civilians, of whom 75 were killed in 1983 alone. Violence intensified further between January 1 and June 3, 1984, when 298 civilians were killed following directives issued from militant leaders operating out of the Golden Temple. Although militancy persisted after Operation Blue Star, the level of violence declined temporarily, with 63 civilians and eight police personnel killed in 1985.[18] A decisive shift, however, occurred in 1987 with the introduction of sophisticated automatic assault rifles, which substantially enhanced the firepower and operational capability of militant groups.

The induction of the Kalashnikov-type assault rifle into the arsenal of Sikh militant groups in 1987, reportedly through Pakistan's covert support, fundamentally altered the nature of the Punjab militancy. According to one account, the first time an AK-47 was used by a Sikh militant in Delhi, 13 people were killed in the space of one hour.[19]

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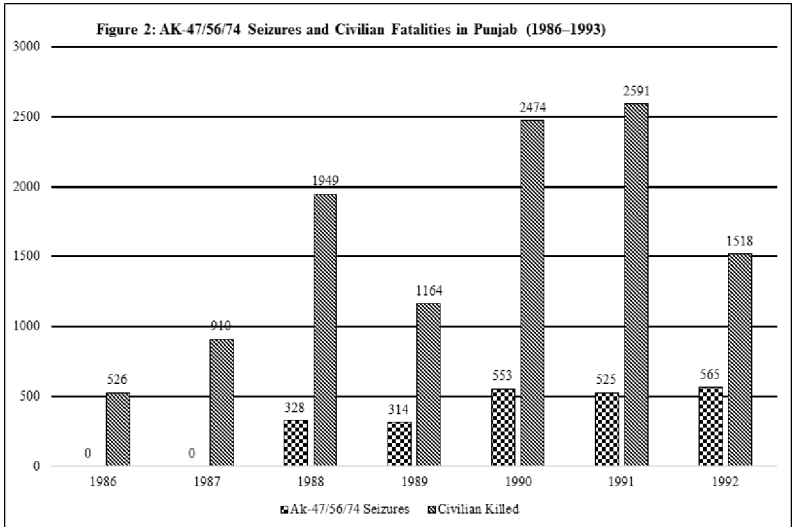
[16] The overwhelming majority of Kalashnikov-type weapons reportedly seized from militants have been of Chinese origin C Types 56, 56-1 and 56-2. Of all the AK-47s reportedly seized in Punjab, fewer than ten have been found to be of Soviet origin. See, "India Arms and Abuses in Indian Punjab and Kashmir", *Human Rights Watch*, 6 (10), September 1994, p. 13, at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA949.PDF.

[17] Ibid.

[18] "Punjab: Backgrounder", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, at https://www.satp.org/backgrounder/india-punjab.

[19] Ibid, p. 34.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the introduction and widespread availability of sophisticated assault rifles fundamentally altered the nature of the Punjab insurgency.



Source: Human Rights Watch Arms Project, September 1994, Vol. 6, No. 10, p. 34.

Before the induction of Kalashnikov rifles in 1987, militant groups largely relied on country-made firearms and conventional weapons, limiting both the frequency and lethality of attacks. Once AK-series rifles became available, militants acquired significantly greater firepower, enabling them to carry out more coordinated and deadlier attacks against civilians. This is reflected in the sharp rise in civilian fatalities from 910 in 1987 to 1,949 in 1988, eventually peaking at 2,591 in 1991, while the number of AK-series rifles seized by security forces also increased steadily.

The simultaneous rise in weapon seizures and civilian deaths indicates that security forces were confronting increasingly well-armed militant

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[2] "Punjab: Backgrounder", n. 18.

groups.[20] The figure therefore substantiates the argument that the availability of sophisticated small arms not only increased the lethality of terrorist violence but also prolonged the insurgency by enhancing the operational capability of militant organisations. As security operations against the militants intensified and these weapons were progressively recovered, civilian fatalities declined sharply.

Militancy in Kashmir

Militancy in Jammu and Kashmir emerged in the late 1980s following widespread allegations that the 1987 State Assembly elections had been manipulated to prevent the Muslim United Front (MUF) from forming the government. The perceived denial of a democratic mandate generated deep political resentment, particularly among Kashmiri youth, providing fertile ground for militant mobilisation. In 1988 and 1989, militants belonging to the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) launched a series of bomb attacks, marking the beginning of an armed insurgency. Like the Sikh militants in Punjab, Kashmiri militants received moral, financial and military support from across the border. From 1988 onwards, Kashmiri youths crossed into Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir for arms training and weapons procurement.[21] By the mid-1990s, Pakistan had increasingly deployed foreign jihadi fighters, including veterans of the Afghan War, to reinvigorate the insurgency.[22] Armed with sophisticated assault rifles, explosives and other military-grade weapons, these militants intensified violence in the Valley, resulting in large-scale civilian casualties, targeted killings and the displacement of thousands, particularly members of the Kashmiri Pandit community.[23]

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[21] It was reported that around 5000 Kashmiri youths crossed over to Pakistan. *Annual Report 1988–89*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1989, p. 8. See Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", in Jeffery Boutwell, Michael T. Klare and Laura W. Reed (Eds.), *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small and Light Weapons*, *the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 71.

[22] *Annual Report 1995–96*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1996, p. 98.

[23] *Annual Report 1990–91*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1991, p. 9.

The insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir demonstrates how the sustained availability of SALW transformed a political movement into a prolonged armed conflict. Beginning in 1989–90, militant organisations received a steady flow of sophisticated weapons, including AK-series assault rifles, light machine guns, grenades and explosives through cross-border support networks.[24] These weapons significantly enhanced the operational capability of militant groups, enabling them to target not only security forces but also civilians, political leaders and members of minority communities. The initial years of the insurgency witnessed an unprecedented escalation in violence. As demonstrated in Figure 3, terrorist incidents increased from 4,158 in 1990 to a peak of 5,938 in 1995, while civilian fatalities rose from 461 to 1,031 during the same period. Civilian deaths, in fact, reached their highest level of 1,341 in 1996, indicating that militant violence had increasingly shifted beyond confrontations with security forces to attacks on the civilian population. The number of terrorists killed also remained exceptionally high throughout the decade, reflecting the intensity of counter-insurgency operations.

Insurgency started witnessing a gradual decline from 1996 to 2000. Violent incidents declined from 5014 in 1996 to 3074 in 2000. Correspondingly, the civilian toll registered a decline from 1341 in 1996 to 847 in 2000. Several factors contributed to this decline. The 1996 elections and subsequent electoral processes helped restore a measure of political institutions and democratic participation. The establishment of an effective counter-insurgency grid and successful operations against the militants also proved to be decisive in bringing down the insurgency in the erstwhile state. Violence levels, however, increased once again from 2001, when the number of violent incidents increased to 4522, and civilian deaths increased to 996. One of the major factors was that Pakistan was pushing in its own jihadis, resulting in high instances of infiltration. The spike in violence during 2001–03 followed a series of major militant attacks. The October 2001 J&K Assembly attack and

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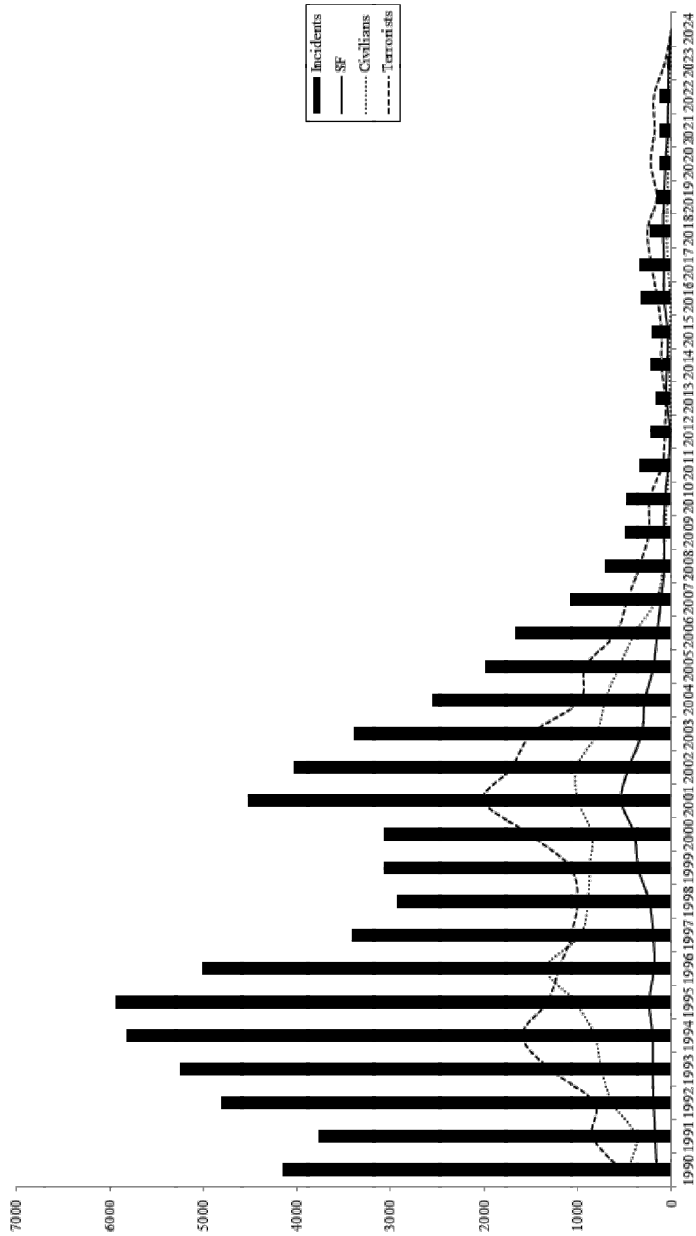
[24] *Annual Report 1995–96*, n. 22, p. 102.

December 2001 Parliament attack sharply escalated India–Pakistan tensions, while the May 2002 Kaluchak attack further intensified militant violence in Kashmir. However, the signing of the India–Pakistan Ceasefire Agreement in November 2003, the peace process and the confidence-building measures helped in normalising bilateral ties. At the same time, stronger counter-insurgency operations, improved border management and fencing reduced the ability of militant groups to sustain their networks. As a result, violence was reduced to only 67 incidents in 2013 and 108 in 2015.

However, the decline was neither uniform nor permanent. From 2016 onwards, terrorist incidents increased again, rising from 208 in 2015 to 342 in 2017, accompanied by an increase in civilian and security force casualties. This phase was characterised by renewed local recruitment following the killing of Burhan Wani, continued infiltration of militants across the Line of Control and the continued availability of sophisticated assault rifles supplied through cross-border networks.[25] Although the scale of violence remained far below the levels witnessed during the 1990s, militant groups retained the capability to conduct targeted attacks against civilians and security personnel because of their continued access to modern small arms.

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[25] Bashir Assad, "Burhan Wani and the Rise in Militancy in South Kashmir", *Vivekananda International Foundation*, July 16, 2019, at https://www.vifindia.org/print/6451?slide=%24slideshow%24. Also see, D.S. Hooda, "The Current Kashmir Imbroglio: Causes and the Way Ahead", *Journal of Defence Studies*, 2 (3), April–June 2018, pp.13–20.



Source: Annual Report (various years), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

The experience of Jammu and Kashmir shows that the availability of sophisticated weapons played a crucial role in sustaining militancy. During the 1990s, the easy flow of assault rifles, grenades and other military-grade weapons enabled militant groups to carry out frequent and more lethal attacks, resulting in a sharp rise in terrorist incidents and civilian and security force casualties. As security forces recovered illegal weapons, disrupted cross-border supply routes and weakened militant networks, both the intensity of violence and the number of fatalities gradually declined. While political and security measures also contributed to this decline, restricting the flow of small arms and light weapons significantly reduced the operational capability of militant groups and helped restore peace and stability.

Mumbai Riots 1993

The 1993 Mumbai serial bombings marked a significant shift in the nature of terrorism in India. The Mumbai blasts demonstrated how organised crime and cross-border terrorism converged to create a serious internal security challenge for India. On March 12, 1993, 12 coordinated explosions targeted prominent commercial and public locations across Mumbai, including the Bombay Stock Exchange, Air India Building, Zaveri Bazaar and Plaza Cinema. The attacks killed 257 people and injured more than 1,400 people, making them the deadliest terrorist attack in India until then.[26] The use of large quantities of military-grade RDX, combined with careful planning and synchronised execution, enabled the attackers to inflict casualties and destruction on a scale that would not have been possible with improvised explosives alone.

The immediate backdrop to the bombings was the communal violence that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992. The riots in Mumbai created an atmosphere of fear and communal tension, which was exploited by Pakistan's ISI and the underworld

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[26] Bachi Karkaria, "How the 1993 blasts changed Mumbai forever", *BBC.com*, July 30, 2015, at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33713846.

syndicate led by Dawood Ibrahim. The Justice B.N. Srikrishna Commission observed that anti-national elements took advantage of the prevailing resentment among a section of Muslim youth to recruit them for terrorist activities. According to investigations, Dawood Ibrahim, operating from Dubai with the support of the ISI, and his close associate Tiger Memon coordinated the conspiracy and arranged for selected recruits to travel to Pakistan via Dubai. There, they received training in handling AK-56 assault rifles, hand grenades, RDX explosives and bomb-making techniques before returning to India to execute the attacks.[27]

A key feature of the conspiracy was the systematic trafficking of sophisticated weapons from Pakistan into India. The maritime routes along the Maharashtra coast that had long been used by D-Company for smuggling gold and other contraband were repurposed to transport military-grade weapons and explosives. Multiple consignments landed at Shekhadi and Dighi in Raigad district on the Maharashtra coast as well as at Gosabara and Tatawadi coasts in the Porbandar and Valsad districts of Gujarat during January and February 1993.[28] These consignments contained 2313 kg of RDX, 63 AK-56 assault rifles, 496 hand grenades, detonators and 39000 rounds of ammunition for AK-56 and 9mm pistols, which were distributed among the conspirators and concealed at different locations around Mumbai and Porbandar.[29] The operation demonstrated how an established criminal smuggling

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[27] B N Srikrishna, *Report of Srikrishna Commission Appointed for Inquiry into the Riots during December 1992 and March 1993*, Volume I & II, August 6, 1998, pp. 59–60.

[28] TNN, "Man who provided RDX for 1993 Mumbai blasts held", *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad, September 19, 2016, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/man-who-provided-rdx-for-1993-mumbai-blasts-held/articleshow/54399650.cms.

[29] Satish Nangaonkar, "1993 bombings conspiracy was a war on Mumbai", *The Hindu*, Mumbai, July 30, 2015, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/1993-bombings-conspiracy-was-a-war-on-mumbai/article7480291.ece.

network could be transformed into an efficient channel for cross-border arms trafficking in support of terrorism. The bombings also highlighted the evolving role of D-Company. Originally engaged in smuggling, extortion and organised crime, the syndicate became an important facilitator of terrorism by providing logistics, transportation, financing and secure smuggling routes for military-grade weapons supplied from Pakistan.

The smuggled weapons were not intended solely for carrying out the Mumbai serial bombings. The recovery of AK-56 assault rifles, hand grenades and large quantities of ammunition during the investigation indicated that the conspiracy was intended not only to carry out the Mumbai bombings but also to facilitate future terrorist activities, foment communal violence and strengthen criminal networks in other parts of the country. Investigations revealed that while explosives and arms from the trawler Bismillah were transported to Mumbai, where they were used for serial bomb blasts, the remaining consignments were transported from the trawler Al-Sadabahar by trucks and cars to Umargam in Gujarat's Valsad district, from where they were reportedly moved to Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.[30]

The 1993 Mumbai bombings showed that the threat to India's internal security was no longer limited to the infiltration of trained militants across the border. Investigations by Indian security agencies have shown that Dawood Ibrahim's D-Company had not only worked closely with Pakistan's ISI to facilitate the movement of arms and explosives in 1993, but in later years, it also facilitated the movement, funding and training of militants, including cadres of the Indian Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba, in Pakistan.

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30 TNN, "Man who provided RDX for 1993 Mumbai blasts held", no. 28.

31 "Weapons from Pakistan arming gangs in Punjab: Cops, *The Times of India*, Amritsar, July 28, 2025, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/weapons-from-pakistan-arming-gangsters-in-punjab-cops/

While the large-scale smuggling of arms during the 1993 Mumbai riots and serial bomb blasts demonstrated how illicit weapons could facilitate terrorism, the nature of illegal arms trafficking in India has evolved considerably. In recent years, the use of drones along the India–Pakistan border has emerged as a significant method for smuggling pistols, assault rifles, explosives and narcotics into Punjab. Investigations by the Delhi Police, Punjab Police and the BSF indicate that these consignments often comprise Chinese-made NORINCO pistols, Turkish Zigana pistols, Austrian Glock handguns and other foreign-manufactured firearms, which command a premium in the illegal arms market because of their reliability, firepower and ease of concealment.[31]

Once dropped across the border, the weapons are collected by local operatives and distributed through well-established criminal networks operating in Punjab before being supplied to gangs in Haryana, Delhi-NCR, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Investigators have found that these weapons are increasingly being used by organised criminal groups involved in extortion, contract killings, targeted shootings and gang rivalries. The arrest of members of an international arms trafficking syndicate in Delhi in November 2025 revealed that sophisticated Chinese and Turkish-made pistols had allegedly been smuggled from Pakistan using drones and supplied to gangs associated with Lawrence Bishnoi, Bambiha and Gogi.[32] Similarly, investigations into shootings in Gurugram and Pune in July 2026 led to the recovery of Chinese-made NORINCO PX-30 pistols and Turkish Zigana

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articleshow/122939971.cms. Himanshu Mishra, "Major arms racket busted in Delhi, China-made weapons were supplied from Pak", *India Today*, New Delhi, November 22, 2025, at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/delhi-illegal-international-arms-racket-lawrence-bishnoi-pakistan-turkey-china-made-weapons-pistols-punjab-police-2824310-2025-11-22.

32 Ibid.

33 Gitesh Shelke, "Turkish and Chinese made pistols seized in Pune extortion case", *The Times of India*, Pune, July 9, 2026, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/turkish-and-chinese-made-pistols-

handguns from criminal gangs, highlighting the growing presence of imported firearms in organised crime.[33]

These incidents indicate that cross-border arms trafficking is no longer driven solely by the objective of supporting terrorist violence but has increasingly converged with organised crime. Foreign-based handlers, cross-border smugglers, local receivers and interstate criminal syndicates now form an integrated illicit supply chain through which sophisticated firearms are channelled into India's criminal underworld. The ready availability of imported pistols has enhanced the firepower of criminal gangs, enabling them to carry out more lethal attacks while simultaneously expanding the market for illegal weapons. Recent recoveries by Punjab Police further suggest that drone deliveries are often accompanied by narcotics, pointing to a convergence between arms trafficking, drug smuggling and organised crime along the western border.[34]

Illegal Domestic Arms Manufacturing: Impact on Insurgency and Crime

The easy availability of weapons manufactured in illegal domestic arms factories has not only sustained insurgencies but also contributed to the

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seized-in-pune-extortion-case/articleshow/132271902.cms. Nikhil Sharma, "Gurgaon society gunfire: How Chinese-made PX-30 pistols reached shooters from Pakistan's black market under scanner", *The Times of India*, Gurgaon, July 12, 2026, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/chinese-norinco-guns-used-in-gurgaon-gang-shooting/articleshow/132337205.cms

34 "Foreign pistols, 115 grams heroin seized by Asr cops", *The Times of India*, Amritsar, February 9, 2026, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/foreign-pistols-115-grams-heroin-seized-by-asr-cops/articleshow/128124478.cms. "3 held, illegal arms smuggling module busted; 7 pistols recovered", *The Times of India*, Amritsar, February 4, 2026, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/3-held-illegal-arms-smuggling-module-busted-7-pistols-recovered/articleshow/127892299.cms.

35 Rajat Kumar Kujur, "The Naxal Quest for Fire Power", *Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies*, September 18, 2006, at https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=2116.

increasing use of firearms in crimes such as murder, robbery, extortion and political violence. Insurgent groups such as the Maoists have relied on locally manufactured firearms from clandestine workshops operating in parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh to supplement weapons acquired through looting from security forces or trafficking. Maoists also had an undetermined number of arms-manufacturing units in the dense forests of Saranda (Jharkhand), Redhakhol (Odisha) and Dandakaranya (Chhattisgarh).[35] Investigations have shown that illegal firearms manufactured in Munger had repeatedly been recovered from Maoist groups operating across the left-wing extremism-affected areas. In 2017, Bihar Police dismantled several illegal gun-making units reportedly operated by Maoist cadres.[36]

The Maoists also had their own arms-manufacturing units, the Technical Research and Arms Manufacturing (TRAM) unit, where they manufactured twelve-bore guns and ammunition, butts and barrels for .303 rifles, grenades, rocket launchers, etc. In fact, in November 2025, security forces destroyed a weapons manufacturing facility of Maoists located in dense forest in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district. They recovered 17 weapons, including a Barrel Grenade Rocket Launcher, six Barrel Grenade Launchers (BGLs), six 12-bore rifles, three single-shot rifles and one country-made pistol.[37] Although these country-made

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[36] Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Illegal arms manufacturers and the continuing threat to India's internal security: An explainer", *Firstpost*, December 27, 2018, at https://www.firstpost.com/india/recent-arrest-of-is-jk-trio-seeking-desi-kattas-shows-illegal-arms-manufacturers-pose-growing-threat-to-internal-security-5792991.html.

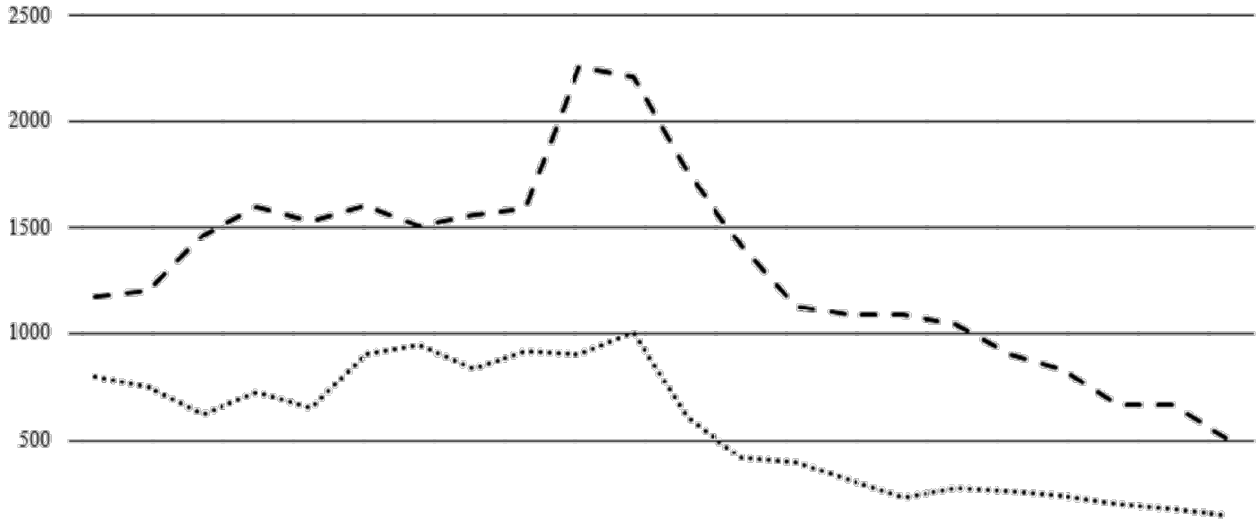
[37] PTI, "Security Forces Destroy Maoist Weapons Factory in Chhattisgarh Forest", *NDTV*, Sukma, November 4, 2025, at https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/security-forces-destroy-maoist-weapons-factory-in-chhattisgarh-forest-9576138. "Tackling Naxal Menace in Coordinated Way", *Press Information Bureau*, New Delhi, July 23, 2014, at https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=107331&reg=48&lang=2.

[38] "Unstarred Question No. 365: Naxal and LWE Violence", *Rajya Sabha*, July 22, 2022, at https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/257/AU365.pdf?source=pqars.

weapons lack the range and reliability of military-grade rifles, they are inexpensive, easy to repair and sufficiently lethal for ambushes, targeted killings and intimidation. Their continued availability has enabled Maoist groups to replenish their arsenals despite sustained counter-insurgency operations and disruptions in external arms supplies.

Access to firearms, explosives and ammunition enabled Maoist groups to conduct more frequent and deadlier attacks. The use of automatic weapons, IEDs, landmines and ambush tactics significantly increased the intensity of violence, resulting in higher casualties. As depicted in Figure 4, from 2000 to 2008, as the left-wing movement expanded geographically and operationally, Maoist violence showed an overall upward trend. Violent incidents increased from 1,179 in 2000 to 1,591 in 2008, despite some year-to-year fluctuations. Fatalities also remained consistently high during this period, ranging between 623 and 952 deaths annually. As the Maoists consolidated their position, the conflict also reached its peak during 2009–2010. Violent incidents rose sharply to 2,258 in 2009, the highest recorded during the period, while fatalities peaked at 1,005 in 2010 (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Violent Incidents and Persons Killed



	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Violent Incidents	1179	1208	1465	1597	1533	1608	1509	1565	1591	2258	2213	1760	1415	1136	1091	1089	1048	908	833	670	665	509
Deaths	804	746	623	726	653	902	952	837	920	905	1005	611	415	397	310	230	278	263	240	202	183	147

Source: Annual Report (various years), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

After 2010, the graph shows a sustained and almost uninterrupted decline in both violent incidents and deaths. Incidents fell from 2,213 in 2010 to 509 in 2021, representing a reduction of about 77 per cent. Similarly, fatalities declined from 1,005 in 2010 to 147 in 2021, a reduction of nearly 85 per cent.[38] Although there was a slight increase in deaths in 2016 (278 compared to 230 in 2015), the overall downward trend remained intact. The decline in both indicators suggests a gradual weakening of the Maoist insurgency and reflects the shrinking operational space of Maoist cadres and their reduced ability to carry out attacks.

In Manipur, the prolonged ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities has witnessed the widespread use of locally manufactured Pumpi guns. Fabricated from metal pipes and other readily available materials, these improvised projectile weapons have evolved from traditional homemade devices into increasingly sophisticated systems capable of firing explosive projectiles over considerable distances. Alongside assault rifles looted from police armouries and weapons trafficked from Myanmar, Pumpi guns have provided armed groups with an additional source of firepower, enabling them to sustain prolonged confrontations even when access to military-grade weapons is limited.[39] Their growing use demonstrates how local innovation and illegal manufacturing can significantly enhance the fighting capability of non-state armed groups.

The impact of domestic illegal arms manufacturing extends well beyond insurgency. Country-made firearms are increasingly used in murders, extortion, land disputes, election-related violence and gang rivalries across India. Recent police operations have repeatedly uncovered illegal

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[39] Monalisa Hazarika and Henrique Garbino, "Manipur's 'Pumpi Guns:' Why Should We Care About Them?", *Forum on the Arms Trade*, November 12, 2024, at https://www.forumarmstrade.org/blog/manipurs-pumpi-guns-why-should-we-care-about-them.

[40] Santosh Singh, "Behind Bihar's violent crimes, web of illegal arms trade, fake licences, police study reveals", *The Indian Express*, Patna, June 16, 2025, at

firearm manufacturing units operating from residential buildings, warehouses and temporary workshops, with weapons supplied through interstate trafficking networks to criminal groups in several states. These networks frequently adapt to law-enforcement pressure by shifting manufacturing locations, using encrypted communication and concealing weapons in modified vehicles, making detection increasingly difficult. A study conducted by the Bihar Police STF titled "Dynamics of Circulation and Trade Networks of Illegal Firearms and Ammunition: A Bihar Perspective" found a close relationship between the circulation of illegal firearms and violent crimes such as murder, kidnapping for ransom, robbery, dacoity and bank robberies. Analysing crime data between 2015 and 2024, the study observed that districts recording the highest recoveries of illegal firearms and ammunition also reported the highest incidence of violent crimes. On average, the police recovered about 3,628 illegal firearms and 17,239 rounds of ammunition annually, highlighting the scale of the illicit arms market.[40]

The growing appeal of domestically manufactured firearms is also evident from investigations into terrorist modules. In one case, three youths from Jammu and Kashmir who pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State were found to have been instructed to procure country-made pistols from Munger before proceeding for terrorist training in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, demonstrating that illegal gun manufacturers are increasingly viewed as reliable suppliers by terrorist organisations.[41] The impact of illegal domestic arms factories extends beyond India's borders. Investigations have linked firearms manufactured in Munger to extremist organisations in Bangladesh, including Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). Weapons originating from these clandestine workshops were reportedly used in the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Dhaka.[42]

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https://indianexpress.com/article/india/behind-bihars-violent-crimes-web-of-illegal-arms-trade-fake-licences-police-study-reveals-10068925/.

41 Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Illegal arms manufacturers and the continuing threat to India's internal security: An explainer", n. 36.

42 Ibid.

The proliferation of SALW through cross-border corridors poses several risks. First, the presence of cross-border arms trafficking networks increases the likelihood that weapons could reach insurgent or militant groups operating in the region. Second, the overlap between arms trafficking and narcotics smuggling strengthens organised criminal networks that operate across states and international borders. Finally, the persistence of these routes contributes to the creation of a transnational crime–terror nexus, where criminal syndicates and armed groups mutually benefit from shared smuggling infrastructure.

The persistence of illegal domestic arms manufacturing demonstrates that as long as clandestine workshops continue to manufacture firearms and criminal networks maintain efficient interstate supply chains, insurgent groups and organised criminals will retain access to inexpensive but lethal weapons.

Chapter V

Countering the Illicit Trade and Proliferation of SALW in India

The trafficking, illicit manufacture and proliferation of small arms and light weapons pose a major challenge to India's internal security, contributing to terrorism, insurgency, organised crime and communal violence. Recognising the gravity of this threat, the Government of India has deployed a layered strategy combining legislative, administrative, and operational interventions designed to choke illicit supply chains and dismantle distribution networks. On the ground, this means strengthening border security to intercept smuggled weapons, sharing real-time intelligence among law-enforcement agencies and raiding illegal domestic gun factories. It also involves collaborating with neighbouring nations to block cross-border networks. At the same time, the government has tightened licensing and tracking systems to keep legally held firearms from being diverted to criminals. Ultimately, all of these efforts aim to do two things: seize the illegal weapons already on the streets, and completely break the financial and criminal networks that trade them.

Legal Framework

India does not have a single dedicated law on SALW. Instead, it relies on a combination of laws that regulate the manufacture, possession, transfer, trafficking, import, export and use of firearms. The principal legal frameworks are as follows:

The Arms Act, 1959

The Arms Act, 1959, which came into force on October 1, 1962[1], is the principal legislation governing the acquisition, possession,

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[1] "Chapter I", *THE ARMS ACT, 1959* [ACT NO. 54 OF 1959], p. 3, at https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/1398/1/A1959_54.pdf.

manufacture, sale, import, export, transport and transfer of arms and ammunition in India. It was enacted to replace the Indian Arms Act, 1878, a colonial law introduced by the British in the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857. The 1878 Act established a stringent licensing system and empowered the colonial administration to regulate civilian access to firearms through provisions relating to licensing, search, seizure, confiscation and penal action. While it ostensibly sought to maintain law and order, its primary objective was to restrict Indians' access to arms and preserve the colonial state's monopoly over the use of force.[2] In contrast, the Arms Act, 1959 established a comprehensive legal framework for regulating civilian access to firearms in independent India, with the twin objectives of facilitating legitimate ownership under a licensing regime while preventing the misuse of arms in the interests of public order, crime prevention and national security.

The Act prohibits the possession or acquisition of firearms without a valid licence, while also requiring licences for the manufacture, repair, conversion, testing and trade of firearms.[3] It classifies certain weapons as prohibited arms and prohibited ammunition, access to which is generally restricted to the armed forces and authorised government agencies.[4] To ensure compliance, it empowers licensing authorities to grant, suspend or revoke licences in the interest of public safety and authorises law-enforcement agencies to conduct searches, seize illegally possessed weapons and prosecute offenders.[5] By prescribing stringent penalties for unlawful possession, illicit manufacture, trafficking and smuggling of firearms, the Act seeks to regulate civilian access to arms while preventing their diversion to criminal and anti-national elements.

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2 The Indian Arms Act [India Act XI, 1878.], October 1, 1878, at https://www.myanmar-law-library.org/IMG/pdf/the_indian_arms_act.pdf.

3 "Chapter II", *THE ARMS ACT, 1959* [ACT NO. 54 OF 1959], n. 1, pp. 5–7.

4 "Chapter I", *THE ARMS ACT, 1959* [ACT NO. 54 OF 1959], n. 1, p. 4.

5 "Chapters III & IV", *THE ARMS ACT, 1959* [ACT NO. 54 OF 1959], n. 1, pp. 9–16.

Recognising the evolving nature of internal security threats, particularly terrorism, organised crime and illicit arms trafficking, the Arms Act, 1959 was amended through the Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 to strengthen India's firearms control regime. According to the Statement of Objects and Reasons accompanying the Amendment Bill, the growing use of illegal firearms by criminal and terrorist groups highlighted the need for a more robust legal framework.[6] Accordingly, the amendment reduced the number of firearms that may be held under a licence from three to two, introduced electronic licences to improve administrative efficiency, criminalised celebratory gunfire, enhanced penalties for the illegal manufacture, sale, transfer and trafficking of firearms, and introduced a statutory definition of illicit trafficking. It also prescribed stricter punishments, including imprisonment extending to life for certain offences involving prohibited arms.[7]

Despite strengthening the legal framework, the effectiveness of the Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 has been questioned by some scholars. Critics argue that while the amendment imposes stricter penalties for illicit manufacture, trafficking and possession of prohibited arms, measures such as reducing the number of firearms that may be held under a licence are unlikely to significantly curb gun-related crime. This is because the overwhelming majority of firearm offences in India involve illegally manufactured or smuggled weapons rather than

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6 Rohin Garg, "Understanding recent amendments to the Arms Act, 1959", *The PRS Blog*, 5 December 2019, at https://prsindia.org/theprsblog/understanding-recent-amendments-arms-act-1959?page=2&per-page=1.

7 The Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 [NO. 48 OF 2019], *The Gazette of India Extraordinary*, New Delhi, December 13, 2019, pp.1–4, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-10/TheArmsAmendmentAct2019%5B1%5D.pdf.

8 Utkarsh Dubey, "The Debilitating Effect of Stringent Gun laws: An Overlooked Perspective", *NLUJ Law Review*, February 8, 2021, at https://nlujlawreview.in/contemporary-issues/the-debilitating-effect-of-stringent-gun-laws-an-overlooked-perspective/.

licensed firearms. Consequently, the principal challenge lies not in regulating lawful firearm ownership but in dismantling illegal arms-manufacturing units, disrupting cross-border trafficking networks and strengthening enforcement against organised criminal groups.[8]

Arms Rules of 2016

The Arms Rules, 2016, framed under the Arms Act, 1959, replaced the Arms Rules, 1962 and significantly modernised India's firearms regulatory framework.[9] The Rules provide detailed procedures for the grant, renewal, suspension and revocation of arms licences; regulate the manufacture, proof-testing, sale, import, export, transport and storage of firearms and ammunition; and prescribe standards for record-keeping by manufacturers and licensed dealers. They also introduce detailed provisions on the marking and identification of firearms, unique identification numbers (UINs), deactivation and destruction of weapons, safe custody, and maintenance of digital records to improve traceability and accountability.[10] By strengthening licensing procedures, standardising firearm marking and enhancing oversight throughout the firearm life cycle, the Arms Rules, 2016 complement the Arms Act, 1959 and plays an important role in preventing the diversion of legally manufactured firearms into illicit markets while facilitating more effective investigation and tracing of illegal weapons.

The Customs Act, 1962

The Customs Act, 1962 complements the Arms Act, 1959 by regulating the cross-border movement of firearms, ammunition and their components. While the Arms Act primarily governs the manufacture, possession and transfer of firearms within the country, the Customs Act empowers the Union government under Section 11 to prohibit or

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9 *The Arms Rules, 2016*, at https://www.thenrai.in/PDF/ed3503ce-c32d-4d97-8dfe-887ec49fd55c.pdf.

10 Ibid.

restrict their import and export in the interests of national security, public order and the prevention of smuggling.[11] The Act further authorises Customs authorities to search, seize and confiscate illegally imported or exported firearms and ammunition (Sections 100–110)[12] and prescribes penalties for smuggling and dealing in prohibited goods under Section 135. These provisions provide the legal basis for intercepting illicit consignments of weapons at ports, airports and land customs stations. The Act is enforced by the Customs Department and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI),[13] which also serves as the nodal agency for the Anti-Smuggling National Coordination Centre (S-CORD), a multi-agency platform established to facilitate real-time intelligence sharing, operational coordination and joint action among more than 20 central and state enforcement agencies involved in combating cross-border smuggling.[14] By integrating the efforts of border guarding forces, intelligence organisations and financial enforcement agencies, S-CORD has strengthened India's ability to detect, intercept and investigate transnational trafficking networks engaged in the illicit movement of firearms, narcotics and other contraband.

Criminal and Terrorism Laws and Acts

While the Arms Act, 1959 is the primary legislation specifically regulating firearms in India, the prevention of the illicit trafficking and proliferation of SALW is also supported by several other criminal and security laws. These statutes do not directly regulate firearms, but they criminalise the

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[11] "Chapter IV Prohibitions on Importation and Exportation of Goods", *Customs Act, 1962*, pp.16–17, at https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15359/1/the_customs_act%2C_1962.pdf.

[12] "Chapter XIII: Searches, Seizure and Arrest", *Customs Act, 1962*.

[13] "History of DRI", *Directorate of Revenue Intelligence*, at https://dri.nic.in/main/history.

[14] "S-CORD holds second meeting to strengthen India's fight against smuggling", *ANI*, New Delhi, October 11, 2025, at https://www.aninews.in/news/business/s-cord-holds-second-meeting-to-strengthen-indias-fight-against-smuggling20251011165646/.

activities for which illicit weapons are procured and used, provide investigative powers to law-enforcement agencies, disrupt financial networks supporting arms trafficking, and prescribe stringent punishments for organised crime and terrorism.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023 and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023 collectively established a powerful legal and procedural framework to curb the illicit trade, proliferation, and misuse of SALW by targeting both criminal syndicates and their financial lifelines. While the substantive penal code of the BNS does not directly regulate firearms, it comprehensively addresses the severe crimes facilitated by them. Specifically, Section 111 of the BNS criminalises organised crime nationwide by designating 'trafficking in weapons' as a continuing unlawful activity; Section 113 penalises the use of firearms in terrorist acts, Section 149 punishes the collection of arms to wage war against the state, Section 150 penalises the concealment of such designs, and Section 152 targets armed secessionist activities that threaten India's sovereignty.[15] By imposing stringent punishments for violent offences like murder, dacoity and extortion, the BNS enables the State to prosecute the misuse of SALW far beyond the limits of the Arms Act.

Complementing this, the BNSS serves as the procedural engine for enforcement; Section 107 empowers law enforcement to apply for the immediate attachment and forfeiture of crime-derived property during the active investigation phase,[16] while its broader provisions authorise agencies to execute searches, recover illegal weapons, gather forensic evidence and arrest offenders. Ultimately, these integrated

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[15] "Chapter VII: Of Offences against The State, The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 [No. 45 of 2023]", *The Gazette of India Extraordinary*, New Delhi, December 25, 2023, p. 48, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/250883_english_01042024.pdf.

[16] "The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 No. 46 Of 2023", *The Gazette of India Extraordinary*, New Delhi, December 25, 2023, pp. 30–31, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-04/250884_2_english_01042024.pdf.

provisions ensure that illicit arms traffickers are not only met with severe sentences up to life imprisonment, but their networks are also systematically dismantled, leaving both their physical stockpiles and financial infrastructures completely shattered.

Similarly, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967 and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002 complement the Arms Act by targeting the operational and financial networks that sustain the illicit proliferation of SALW. The UAPA is a key instrument for preventing the proliferation of SALW among terrorist and insurgent groups. Section 15 defines a terrorist act to include the use of firearms and other lethal weapons to threaten the sovereignty and security of India or to strike terror among the public, while Sections 17, 18 and 20 criminalise the financing, conspiracy, recruitment and membership of terrorist organisations.[17] These provisions enable authorities to prosecute not only the use of illicit firearms but also those involved in procuring, supplying and financing weapons for terrorist groups. Complementing the UAPA, the PMLA, 2002 addresses the financial dimension of illicit arms trafficking. Since offences under the Arms Act, 1959 are included as scheduled offences under the PMLA, law-enforcement agencies can treat the proceeds generated from illegal arms manufacturing and trafficking as proceeds of crime, enabling the Enforcement Directorate to trace, attach, freeze and confiscate the assets of arms traffickers and criminal syndicates.[18]

While a legal framework provides the basis for regulating firearms and prosecuting offenders, legislation alone cannot effectively curb the illicit trafficking and proliferation of SALW. Recognising that a significant proportion of illegal firearms originate from cross-border smuggling

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[17] "Chapter IV Punishment for Terrorist Activities", *The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967*, pp. 11–13, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1967-37.pdf.

[18] "Chapter II Offence of Money-Laundering", *The Prevention of Money-Laundering Act,* 2002, at https://enforcementdirectorate.gov.in/media/pmla/d7162b8f-d022-4583-b942-d5bb85dbe796_THE%20PREVENTION%20OF%20MONEY%20LAUNDERING%20ACT,%202002.pdf.

and clandestine domestic manufacturing, the Government of India has adopted a range of administrative and operational measures to complement its legal response. These measures include strengthening border management through fencing, enhanced surveillance and coordinated patrolling, improving intelligence gathering and inter-agency coordination.

Administrative and Operational Measures

Secure borders form India's first line of defence against the inflow of illicit weapons. Towards this objective, Government of India has prioritised upgrading border infrastructure through a combination of physical barriers and high-tech surveillance. During the peak of militancy in Punjab in the 1980s, the India–Pakistan border became a major route for the smuggling of illicit small arms, explosives and narcotics. Militants frequently crossed into Pakistan for training and returned with sophisticated weapons to carry out terrorist attacks in India. To curb these cross-border activities and disrupt the flow of illegal arms, the Government of India initiated a comprehensive border fortification programme in April 1988. The project involved constructing barbed-wire fencing along vulnerable stretches of the border, installing floodlights and deploying electronic surveillance equipment to improve border monitoring.[19]

The border fencing substantially disrupted the traditional routes used for smuggling arms into Punjab and made cross-border infiltration more difficult. However, it did not completely eliminate the illicit flow of weapons. Instead, trafficking networks adapted by shifting their supply routes through the Thar Desert along the Rajasthan border and the relatively less-fortified stretches of the Jammu and Kashmir border.[20]

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[19] *Annual Report 1988–1989*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 7–8.

[20] "India Arms and Abuses in Indian Punjab and Kashmir", *Human Rights Watch*, .6 (10), September 1994, p. 14, at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA949.PDF.

As traffickers attempted to shift their activities to less-guarded areas, the programme of border fencing was extended to the adjoining districts of Ganganagar and Bikaner in Rajasthan. By 1993, 433.92 km of fencing had been completed along the Punjab border and 332.72 km along the Rajasthan border.[21]

The outbreak of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir in 1989 opened another major route for the cross-border trafficking of SALW. As fencing along the Punjab and Rajasthan borders made infiltration increasingly difficult, arms traffickers and militant groups shifted their routes to the relatively unfenced stretches of the India–Pakistan border in Jammu and Kashmir and Gujarat.[22] Recognising this emerging threat, the Union Cabinet approved the construction of 180 km of border fencing and 195.8 km of floodlighting along the International Border in the Jammu sector in March 1995. However, construction was repeatedly disrupted by firing from across the border and could gather momentum only after the 2003 India–Pakistan ceasefire agreement.[23] The project was completed in 2007, significantly strengthening border security and reducing cross-border infiltration and the smuggling of arms into Jammu and Kashmir. At the same time, the Government of India also strengthened security along the Gujarat border to prevent traffickers from exploiting the marshy and sparsely populated terrain as an alternative route. By March 2025, 2068.406 km of fencing work along the India–Pakistan border had been completed.[24]

Similar measures were adopted along the India–Bangladesh border to prevent cross-border infiltration and the smuggling of arms and other

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[21] "First Report on Demands for Grants Nos. 42 & 44 of Ministry of Home Affairs for the Year 1993–94", Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, *Rajya Sabha*, April 28, 1993, p. 25.

[22] Paul Wallace, "Political Violence and Terrorism in India: The Crisis of Identity", in Martha Crenshaw (ed.) *Terrorism in Context*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2007, p. 402.

[23] *Annual Report 2003–04*, New Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2004, pp. 56–57.

[24] *Annual Report 2024–25*, New Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2025, p. 31.

contraband. By March 2025, 3,232.2 km of the 4,096.7 km international border had been fenced,[25] covering nearly 80 per cent of the border and significantly strengthening border security. The Government of India has progressively strengthened security along the India–Myanmar border to curb the cross-border movement of insurgents, arms traffickers and other illegal elements. As an initial measure, it constructed a 10 km pilot fence near Moreh in Manipur, between Border Pillars 79 and 81, a sector long recognised as one of the most vulnerable routes for infiltration and cross-border trafficking.[26]

The ethnic violence that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 yet again underscored the continued misuse of the 1,643 km porous and largely unfenced border by insurgent groups, traffickers and infiltrators, who exploited the difficult terrain to smuggle arms and ammunition, narcotics and other contraband, thereby aggravating the security situation in Manipur and the wider Northeast. Recognising that piecemeal measures were inadequate, the Government of India announced in February 2024 that the entire India–Myanmar border would be progressively fenced and decided to further restrict the provisions under the Free Movement Regime (FMR) to strengthen border control. The fencing project, estimated to cost ₹31,000 crore,[27] envisages the construction of a comprehensive border barrier to prevent illegal cross-border

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[25] Ibid.

[26] *Annual Report 2005–06*, New Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2006, p. 38.

[27] "Modi government has decided to construct a fence along the entire 1643 kilometer long Indo-Myanmar border", *Press Information Bureau*, New Delhi, February 6, 2024, at https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2003199&reg=48&lang=2#:~:text=Press%20Release%20Page%20%7C%20Press%20Information%20Bureau.,stretch%20in%20Moreh%2C%20Manipur%20already%20been%20fenced. "Govt to spend Rs 31,000 crore to fence 1,643 km India-Myanmar border", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 18, 2024, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-to-spend-rs-31000-crore-to-fence-1643-km-india-myanmar-border/articleshow/113454941.cms#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%3A%20The%20Indian%20government%20on%20Wednesday,of%20Manipur%2C%20Mizoram%2C%20Nagaland%2C%20and%20Arunachal%20Pradesh.

movement and disrupt transnational trafficking networks. Till August 2026, around 55km of fencing has been completed along the Manipur sector,[28] with the remaining stretches to be constructed in phases.

As border fencing and enhanced surveillance made traditional cross-border smuggling routes increasingly difficult to use, traffickers adapted their methods to continue moving small arms, narcotics and other contraband into India. Initially, they attempted to bypass physical barriers by constructing cross-border tunnels beneath the border fence. One such tunnel, measuring 116 feet in length and 2–3 feet in diameter, was detected by the BSF on March 14, 1997 between Border Out Posts (BOPs) Channa and Panj Guraian in the Ajnala sector of Amritsar district.[29] In the last two decades, India has reportedly uncovered 22 tunnels originating from Pakistan into Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. While tunnels enabled traffickers to evade surface surveillance, they are expensive to construct, difficult to maintain and become ineffective once detected and destroyed by security forces.

Given these difficulties and given the widespread availability of commercial drones, traffickers increasingly shifted to aerial smuggling. Drones enabled them to transport small arms, ammunition, narcotics and explosives across the border without physically crossing it, making detection and interception more challenging. In many cases, traffickers used drones to deliver composite consignments containing both drugs and firearms, reflecting the close nexus between narcotics trafficking and the illicit arms trade. This emerging trend has become a major security challenge along the Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir borders. The growing use of drones is reflected in the sharp increase in drone-

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[28] "Indo-Myanmar Border Fencing Reaches 55 km, Full Completion Targeted for 2028", *Mizzima*, September 7, 2026, at https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/indo-myanmar-border-fencing-reaches-55-km-full-completion-targeted-2028.

[29] "Question No. 3418: Tunnel Dug Up in Punjab by ISI", *Rajya Sabha*, New Delhi, May 7, 1997, at https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/180/Au3418.pdf?source=pqars.

assisted smuggling incidents detected by the BSF, which rose from just three cases in 2021 to 305 cases in 2025.[30]

Recognising the growing threat posed by tunnel and drone-based smuggling, the Government of India has adopted a comprehensive counter-tunnel and drone strategy along the western border. Moving beyond conventional patrolling and manual detection, the BSF has introduced AI-enabled anti-tunnelling systems along vulnerable stretches of the Punjab and Jammu borders to detect underground excavation and infiltration in real-time.[31] These systems integrate ground sensors, seismic and vibration detectors, drone-mounted Ground Penetrating Radars (GPR), electro-optical sensors, radars and night-vision cameras to identify subterranean tunnels and provide early warning of suspicious activity.[32] The BSF has also constructed anti-tunnel trenches in infiltration-prone areas of Jammu, Samba and Kathua to facilitate the detection of tunnels being excavated from across the border. Integrated with border fencing, floodlighting, anti-drone systems and other surveillance infrastructure, this technology-driven security grid has significantly enhanced the BSF's ability to detect, map and dismantle cross-border

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30 "Raj Shekhar Jha, "Drone drug trafficking cases up 100-fold in 5 Years", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, June 27, 2026, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/drone-drug-trafficking-cases-up-100-fold-in-5-years/articleshow/132024537.cms.

31 Harpreet Bajwa, "BSF rolls out advanced AI-based anti-tunnelling, anti-drone systems along Indo-Pak border", *The New Indian Express*, Chandigarh, December 2, 2025, at https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2025/Dec/02/bsf-rolls-out-advanced-ai-based-anti-tunnelling-anti-drone-systems-along-indo-pak-border. "BSF Deploys Anti-Tunnelling System on Punjab–Jammu Border", *News on Air*, December 2, 2025, at https://newsonair.gov.in/bsf-deploys-anti-tunnelling-system-on-punjab-jammu-border/#:~:text=Border%20Security%20Force%20(BSF)%20has,by%20Pakistan%20to%20send%20terrorists.

32 PTI, "BSF deploys drone-mounted radars to check under-ground tunnels along border with Pakistan", *The Hindu*, Jammu, January 9, 2023, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bsf-deploys-drone-mounted-radars-to-check-under-ground-tunnels-along-border-with-pakistan/article66352865.ece.

tunnels, thereby strengthening border security along India's western frontier.[33]

Anti-drone systems have been deployed to detect, track and neutralise hostile drones using electronic and other interception technologies. Whenever drone activity is detected, information is immediately shared with the BSF headquarters, the Indian Air Force and the local police to ensure a coordinated response.[34] BOPs, observation posts and patrol units are simultaneously alerted to monitor the drone's flight path and intercept its payload or apprehend the intended receivers. The BSF also employs day and night surveillance equipment to continuously monitor aerial activity, while intelligence gathering and coordination with other security agencies have been strengthened to identify and dismantle the trafficking networks. Surveillance has also been intensified at vulnerable crossing points and suspected payload drop locations, and residents of border villages are sensitised to report suspicious drone activity. The government's efforts are further supported by the induction of indigenously developed counter-drone technologies such as the IG T-Shul Pulse,[35] reflecting a broader shift towards technology-driven border security and the use of domestic defence systems to counter emerging aerial threats.

Regional and International Cooperation to Combat the Illicit Trafficking of SALW

Recognising that the illicit trafficking of SALW is a transnational challenge closely linked to terrorism, insurgency and organised crime, India has

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[33] Mayank Kumar, "BSF steps up dismantling of terror tunnels in Jammu's 'infiltration-prone zone'. 24 km done, 7 to go", *The Print*, New Delhi, January 23, 2025, at https://theprint.in/india/bsf-steps-up-dismantling-of-terror-tunnels-in-jammus-infiltration-prone-zone-24-km-done-7-to-go/2457672.

[34] Ibid.

[35] PTI, "Indian defence firm secures order for anti-drone system for Army, Navy", *The Economic Times*, New Delhi, January 17, 2026, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-defence-firm-secures-order-for-anti-drone-system-for-army-navy/articleshow/126547844.cms?from=mdr.

consistently maintained that national efforts alone are insufficient to address the problem. Having itself suffered from cross-border terrorism and illicit arms trafficking, India welcomed the UN Secretary-General's Report (S/2025/670), which observed that the diversion and illicit trafficking of SALW continue to sustain terrorist and armed groups in conflict-affected regions, facilitated by porous borders, inadequate stockpile security and transnational trafficking networks, while the growing availability of improvised and craft-produced weapons has further complicated tracing and accountability.[36]

In response to the report, India advocated a comprehensive approach based on five key pillars. These are: a robust legal framework backed by political commitment; effective institutional coordination; reliable systems for marking, record-keeping and tracing firearms; sound risk management to prevent diversion; strong border security and stockpile management.[37] It has consistently supported regional and multilateral initiatives, emphasising that international cooperation, technical assistance and capacity building are essential to disrupt transnational trafficking networks and strengthen the ability of States to combat the illicit trade in SALW.

India regards the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UNPoA) as the principal international framework for addressing illicit SALW trafficking. It has consistently supported the effective implementation of the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) to strengthen international cooperation in identifying, tracing and preventing the diversion of illicit firearms. India has maintained that the UNPoA should remain focused on preventing the illicit trade in SALW and denying access to non-state actors rather than

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[36] "Statement by Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish, Permanent Representative on UN Security Council Open Debate on Small Arms", *Permanent Mission of India*, New York, November 10, 2025, at https://pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNSC?id=NTQ3OQ.

[37] Ibid.

regulating the legitimate transfer of conventional arms between States.[38] It also welcomed the consensus outcome of the Eighth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS-8) in 2022, which reaffirmed commitments to strengthen national controls, enhance international cooperation and assistance, improve stockpile management and address emerging challenges such as polymer and modular firearms.[39] India has complemented these international commitments by establishing the institutional and technical mechanisms necessary to implement its obligations under the UNPoA and the ITI and by regularly submitting national reports on their implementation.

India has also emerged as an important contributor to international capacity building in SALW control. In 2026, it hosted the first United Nations Fellowship Training Programme on Small Arms and Light Weapons Control for the Asia-Pacific region at Jabalpur. Organised by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) through the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific (UNRCPD), in collaboration with the Ministries of External Affairs and Defence, the programme brought together officials from several Asia-Pacific countries for training on the implementation of the UNPoA and the ITI, including weapons marking, tracing, stockpile management and measures to combat illicit trafficking.[40] By hosting this programme, India has

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[38] "Outcome of the Eighth Biennial Meeting on the UN Programme of Action to prevent, combat and eradicate illicit trade & International Tracing Instrument for illicit small arms and light weapons", *Ministry of External Affairs*, July 04, 2022, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/35471/Outcome_of_the_Eighth_Biennial_Meeting_on_the_UN_Programme_of_Action_to_prevent_combat_and_eradicate_illicit_trade__International_Tracing_Instrument_f.

[39] "Report of the Eighth Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects", *United Nations General Assembly*, New York, July 12, 2022, at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3983150?utm_source=chatgpt.com&v=pdf.

[40] "India hosts 1st UN training program on Small Arms Control for Asia-Pacific region in Jabalpur", *DD News*, February 16, 2026, at https://ddnews.gov.in/en/india-hosts-1st-un-training-program-on-small-arms-control-for-asia-pacific-region-in-jabalpur/.

strengthened its role not only as a participant in global disarmament initiatives but also as a regional hub for technical cooperation and capacity building on SALW control.

India has always advocated stronger international cooperation in intelligence sharing, customs enforcement and information exchange to identify trafficking routes, diversion points and illicit transfers. Indian Customs participates in enforcement operations and capacity-building programmes coordinated by the World Customs Organisation (WCO). India also exchanges information with partner countries on the diversion of firearms, ammunition and dual-use items.[41] Although India is not a State Party to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), it supports the Treaty's objective of preventing the illicit diversion of conventional arms and promoting responsible international transfers. At the same time, it has consistently maintained that any global arms-control framework should respect the legitimate security interests and sovereign rights of States, avoid imposing disproportionate obligations on importing countries, and strengthen national export controls, marking and tracing mechanisms, stockpile security and accountability to prevent legally manufactured weapons from entering illicit markets. India has also consistently advocated stronger international measures to prevent the transfer of SALW to terrorists and other non-state actors, recognising that such weapons continue to fuel terrorism, insurgency and organised crime.[42]

At the regional level, India has strengthened cooperation with neighbouring countries through intelligence sharing, coordinated border

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[41] "Statement delivered by Ambassador Pankaj Sharma, Permanent Representative of India to the Conference on Disarmament during Seventh Biennial Meeting of States (BMS) to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects with a substantive focus on Agenda item – 8: Cooperation and Assistance", *Permanent Mission of India to the Conference on Disarmament*, Geneva, July 27, 2021, at https://pmindiaun.gov.in/Cdgeneva/statement_content/MzY3.

[42] Gurmeet Kanwal, "India abstains and exposes the Arms Trade Treaty", *IDSA Comment*, April 8, 2013, at https://idsa.in/publisher/comments/india-abstains-and-exposes-the-arms-trade-treaty.

management and joint efforts to combat terrorism, insurgency and transnational organised crime. It engages with regional organisations such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Economic Cooperation) and ASEAN (Association for South East Asian Nations)-led mechanisms to promote cooperation on border security and transnational crime.[43] Bilaterally, India has established Joint Working Groups and other institutional mechanisms with neighbouring countries to improve intelligence exchange, coordinate border management and disrupt cross-border trafficking networks. Cooperation with Myanmar has been particularly important in targeting insurgent groups and disrupting arms supply routes through coordinated operations and enhanced information sharing.[44] India has also extended training and capacity-building assistance to the police and law-enforcement agencies of neighbouring countries to strengthen their ability to detect, seize and investigate illicit SALW trafficking.[45]

These initiatives demonstrate India's evolving role from being primarily a participant in international SALW control mechanisms to becoming an active contributor to regional and global capacity building. Through its support for multilateral frameworks, implementation of international tracing standards, regional security cooperation and technical assistance programmes, India has sought to strengthen collective efforts to prevent

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[43] "Statement By Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill, Minister [Disarmament], on the Preparatory Committee for The Second Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects", *Permanent Mission of India to the Conference on Disarmament*, New York, March 19, 2012, at https://pmindiaun.gov.in/public_files/assets/pdf/statement_05092022_4.pdf.

[44] Express News Service, "India, Myanmar review border security, agree to boost intelligence sharing", *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, July 9, 2026, at https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-myanmar-review-border-security-agree-to-boost-intelligence-sharing-10778350/.

[45] "Statement By Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill, Minister [Disarmament], on the Preparatory Committee for The Second Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects", no. 43

the diversion of firearms, dismantle transnational trafficking networks and deny terrorists and organised criminal groups' access to illicit weapons.

Challenges to Combating the Proliferation of SALW in India

Despite a comprehensive legal framework and sustained administrative and operational measures, the illicit manufacture, trafficking and proliferation of SALW continue to pose a major internal security challenge in India. The persistence of this threat reflects the complex interaction of geographical, institutional, technological, legal and socio-economic factors. The diversity of trafficking routes, the involvement of organised criminal and terrorist networks, and the rapid adaptation of smugglers to emerging technologies have made the problem increasingly difficult to address. While significant progress has been made in strengthening border management, law enforcement and international cooperation, several challenges continue to undermine the effectiveness of India's response.

Porous Borders and Location

One of the major challenges in combating the proliferation of SALW in India is its geographical location and the nature of its international borders. India shares over 15,000 km of land borders with seven countries, much of which passes through mountains, dense forests, deserts, riverine areas and difficult terrain, making effective surveillance a constant challenge. Several stretches of these borders remain porous and are exploited by traffickers, insurgents and organised criminal groups.[46] India's vulnerability is further compounded by its location between the Golden/Death Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the Golden/Death Triangle (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand), two of the world's major centres for the production and trafficking of narcotics and other illicit goods. Arms traffickers often use these well-

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[46] Pushpita Das, *India's Approach to Border Management: From barriers to Bridges*, Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2021, pp.14–23.

established smuggling routes to move firearms, ammunition and narcotics together across India's borders. As a result, the same transnational criminal networks involved in drug trafficking are frequently engaged in the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons, making border management and law enforcement significantly more complex.

Hostile Security Environment

The second challenge arises from the hostile security environment along some of India's borders. Pakistan has consistently used cross-border terrorism as an instrument of proxy warfare, with the infiltration of terrorists often accompanied by the smuggling of small arms, ammunition, explosives and narcotics into India. Over the years, investigations by the NIA, BSF and Punjab Police have revealed that Pakistan-based terrorist groups and organised criminal networks have increasingly used drones, cross-border tunnels and local smuggling networks to deliver assault rifles, pistols, grenades and ammunition to operatives and criminal gangs in Punjab and elsewhere.[47] Similarly, insurgent groups operating in Northeast India have acquired large quantities of foreign-origin weapons, including Chinese-manufactured assault rifles and ammunition, through trafficking networks extending across Myanmar and Bangladesh. The prolonged political instability in Myanmar, the presence of insurgent camps along the border and the availability of illicit arms in Southeast Asia have enabled these networks to continue supplying weapons to insurgent organisations operating in the Northeast.[48]

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[47] Devesh K. Pandey, "NIA conducts searches in four States in cross-border arms smuggling case", *The Hindu*, New Delhi, May 29, 2026, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nia-conducts-searches-in-four-states-in-cross-border-arms-smuggling-case/article71038429.ece. Arvind Ojha, "ISI-backed terror module smuggling arms, drugs busted in Delhi; 7 arrested", *India Today*, New Delhi, June 16, 2026, at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/delhi-police-bust-pakistan-backed-terror-crime-module-seven-arrested-2928014-2026-06-16.

[48] Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "China supplying arms, providing hideouts to northeast militants via Myanmar, India alleges", *India Today*, New Delhi, December 7, 2020, at https://theprint.in/defence/china-supplying-arms-providing-hideouts-to-northeast-militants-via-myanmar-india-alleges/561891/.

Nexus Between Terrorism, Insurgency, Organised Crime and Narcotics Trafficking

The third challenge arises from the close nexus between terrorism, insurgency, organised crime and narcotics trafficking. In conflict-affected regions such as Jammu & Kashmir and parts of Northeast India, the continued presence of terrorist and insurgent groups sustains the demand for sophisticated small arms and light weapons. These weapons are rarely trafficked in isolation; they are often smuggled alongside narcotics and arms through the same transnational criminal networks. Drug trafficking, in particular, has emerged as a major source of funding for terrorist organisations, insurgent groups and organised criminal syndicates, enabling them to procure sophisticated firearms and ammunition from domestic and international illicit markets. The growing phenomenon of composite consignment of narcotics and arms along the India–Pakistan border illustrates how drug trafficking finances the procurement of sophisticated firearms for terrorist and organised criminal groups.[49] The convergence of these illicit activities has created highly organised criminal networks that operate across national borders, making investigations and enforcement more difficult and necessitating close coordination among intelligence agencies, law enforcement organisations and border guarding forces.

Institutional and Coordination Challenges

India also faces significant institutional and coordination challenges in combating the illicit trafficking and proliferation of SALW. Responsibility for addressing this threat is shared among several central and state agencies, including the state police, the BSF, the Assam Rifles, Customs, the DRI, the NIA and intelligence agencies. While legislation relating to arms control, import regulations and national security falls under the jurisdiction of the Union government, policing and public order are

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[49] Harjeet Bajwa, "Punjab Police arrests three, busts drug-arms smuggling module; heroin, weapons seized", *The New Indian Express*, Chandigarh, May 18, 2026, at https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2026/May/18/punjab-police-arrests-three-busts-drug-arms-smuggling-module-heroin-weapons-seized.

state subjects.[50] Consequently, central agencies responsible for countering cross-border arms trafficking depend heavily on state police forces for local intelligence, investigations, arrests and prosecution. Although institutional mechanisms such as the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC), its subsidiary Multi-Agency Centres (SMACs), and the S-CORD have strengthened intelligence sharing and inter-agency coordination, differences in organisational priorities, operational procedures, turf wars and information-sharing practices continue to hamper timely action. These challenges are further compounded by disparities in manpower, training, technical expertise and forensic capabilities across states, affecting the overall effectiveness of India's response to illicit arms trafficking.

Weaknesses in Firearm Licensing and Regulatory Oversight

Although the Arms Act, 1959 and the Arms Rules, 2016 establish a comprehensive licensing regime, recent investigations have shown that forged licences, fraudulent documentation, corruption and administrative loopholes continue to be exploited to acquire firearms illegally. One of the most significant cases came to light in Jammu and Kashmir, where the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) took over the investigation of two cases relating to the bulk issuance of arms licences between 2012 and 2016. The investigation revealed that more than 2.78 lakh arms licences had allegedly been issued to ineligible persons across 22 districts. The CBI alleged that certain district magistrates, additional district magistrates and gun dealers had conspired to issue licences to persons who were neither entitled to possess firearms nor were they residents of the districts where the licences had been issued.[51] Similar weaknesses were revealed in Uttarakhand, where the

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[50] "Unstarred Question No. 5074: Fake Arms Licences", *Rajya Sabha*, New Delhi, March 27, 2017, at https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/14/AU5074.pdf?source=pqals.

[51] "CBI Conducts Searches at Around 40 Locations in an on-going Investigation if a Case Related to Arms Licencing Racket in J&K", *CBI Press Release*, New Delhi, July 24, 2021, at https://cbi.gov.in/press-detail/NDUwNQ==.

STF, under Operation *Prahar*, uncovered an interstate fake arms licence racket operating through Udham Singh Nagar district. The investigation led to the identification of numerous suspicious arms licences, the seizure of forged licences and firearms pending verification, and the arrest of members of the syndicate involved in preparing fake documents and facilitating the illegal procurement of licences.[52]

These cases demonstrate that, despite the introduction of the National Database of Arms Licences (NDAL) to digitise firearm records and strengthen licence verification, significant implementation challenges remain. The integration of legacy paper-based records maintained by district licensing authorities into a unified national database has been a gradual process, with variations in the pace of digitisation across states.[53] Delays in updating records, incomplete digitisation, inadequate data sharing and irregularities in record management continue to create gaps in the system, making it more difficult to verify licences and detect fraudulent or duplicate records in real-time. Such weaknesses can potentially be exploited to obtain or retain firearms through forged documentation or by circumventing regulatory controls. Strengthening the digitisation of historical records, ensuring seamless integration of licensing databases across states and enhancing oversight of licensing authorities are therefore essential for improving the effectiveness of India's firearm licensing regime.

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[52] "Drive Against Fake Arms Licences: 94 Suspicious Licences Under Lens, 119 Weapons Seized In Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar", *ETV Bharat*, Rudrapur, July 15, 2026, at https://www.etvbharat.com/en/bharat/campaign-against-fake-arms-licences-94-suspicious-licences-119-weapons-seized-in-uttarakhands-udham-singh-nagar-district-enn26071502772?fbclid=IwY2xjawTFYoNleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETFlMjJIY3U4ZUNZcXpWaHJ4c3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjIyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHtjtyJBCepMZkrTfL5id4ahQGRgkT5-D1ywZvUMjKr1iEuO18tdaLz6HNGzf_aem_5M2uW8uKPZZkVVnIU2m4Cw.

[53] Avinash Kumar, "Bihar set to miss arms licenses database deadline", *Hindustan Times*, Patna, March 15, 2017, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bihar-set-to-miss-arms-licenses-database-deadline/story-ncA6Wk2hblstZwABH7lDXN.html.

Technological Advancements in Smuggling Methods

The rapid evolution of trafficking methods has emerged as another major operational challenge in combating the proliferation of SALW. As border fencing, surveillance systems and intensified patrolling have made traditional land-based smuggling routes increasingly difficult to exploit, traffickers have continuously adapted their methods by using underground tunnels, commercial drones, encrypted communication platforms, cryptocurrencies and social media to facilitate the procurement, financing and movement of illicit firearms. Among these, the use of commercial drones has transformed cross-border arms trafficking, particularly along the Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir borders.[54] Flying at low altitudes, often at night, drones are used to deliver compact consignments of pistols, assault rifles, ammunition, explosives and narcotics to pre-designated locations inside Indian territory, enabling traffickers to bypass physical border barriers and minimise the risk of interception.

Advances in digital manufacturing are creating new challenges for firearms regulation and law enforcement. The growing accessibility of affordable 3D printers, digital computer-aided design (CAD) files and polymer-based materials has facilitated the emergence of privately manufactured firearms, commonly known as 'ghost guns', which can be produced outside conventional industrial supply chains and often lack serial numbers, making tracing and regulation more difficult.[55] Security analysts have warned that the increasing availability of additive manufacturing technology is steadily lowering the barriers to the illicit

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[54] Manjeet Negi, "Exclusive: Pak shifts tactics, turns drone launchpad for narcotics, arms smuggling into India", *India Today*, New Delhi, January 23, 2026, at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistani-ditches-old-routes-drone-narcotics-arms-smuggling-india-launchpad-2856949-2026-01-23. "Smuggling of Arms and Narcotics", *Press Information Bureau*, Delhi, March 28, 2023, at https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1911737&reg=48&lang=2.

[55] Aditya Sahay, "Rise of Ghost Guns in India: 3D Printing and the Arms Act in India", *Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research*, VII (II), April 10, 2025, p. 925.

manufacture of firearms and has the potential to undermine existing arms control and export control regimes. The experience of Myanmar, where resistance groups have manufactured and used FGC-9 firearms produced from 3D-printed and commercially available components, demonstrates that such technology is no longer confined to advanced industrial countries but is increasingly accessible in conflict-affected regions.[56]

Although there is no evidence that 3D-printed firearms currently constitute a significant source of illicit weapons in India, their growing global availability poses an emerging challenge for the country's legal and enforcement framework. The Arms Act, 1959 and the Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 regulate the manufacture and possession of firearms, but decentralised production through 3D printing, the circulation of digital firearm blueprints and the manufacture of unserialised polymer components raise regulatory and investigative challenges that were not envisaged when the legislation was enacted.[57] Recent forensic research, however, suggests that these weapons may not be as untraceable as previously believed. Scientists have demonstrated that the chemical composition of polymer filaments used in 3D printing can assist investigators in identifying the manufacturing source of ghost guns, thereby improving forensic attribution.[58] Still, the need to bring these 'ghost guns' under the regulatory framework is essential to prevent their illicit manufacture and trafficking.

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[56] Monalisa Hazarika, "The Next Frontier of Conflict: Why 3D-Printed Weapons Will Demand Attention in 2026", *Forum on the Arms Trade*, December 16, 2025, at https://www.forumarmstrade.org/blog/the-next-frontier-of-conflict-why-3d-printed-weapons-will-demand-attention-in-2026.

[57] Aditya Sahay, "Rise of Ghost Guns in India: 3D Printing and the Arms Act in India", n. 55, pp. 926–927, 931.

[58] Agencies, "3D-printed 'ghost guns' are not as untraceable as criminals think", *The Shillong Times*, February 26, 2026, at https://theshillongtimes.com/2026/02/26/3d-printed-ghost-guns-are-not-as-untraceable-as-criminals-think/.

Manufacture and Availability of Illicit Firearms Within India

In addition to sophisticated weapons trafficked across international borders, illegal arms-manufacturing clusters continue to operate in parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and other states, supplying inexpensive country-made firearms to criminal groups and, occasionally, insurgent and extremist elements. Their continued production is driven by a combination of socio-economic factors, including poverty, unemployment, the persistence of traditional gunsmithing skills and weak local governance in certain areas. These locally manufactured weapons are inexpensive, easy to conceal and readily available, making them attractive for use in murders, robberies, extortion and other violent crimes.

From an enforcement perspective, country-made firearms present significant investigative challenges. Unlike legally manufactured firearms, they are produced outside the regulated manufacturing and licensing system and generally do not bear standard serial numbers, manufacturer markings or production records. Consequently, investigators cannot trace them to a licensed manufacturer, dealer or lawful owner through conventional firearm registration and tracing systems. At the same time, their crude and improvised manufacture often results in distinctive tool marks on fired bullets and cartridge cases, which can assist forensic experts in linking recovered ammunition to a particular firearm. However, such ballistic examination is useful only when the weapon is recovered and compared with crime scene evidence. It does not reveal the firearm's origin or the network through which it was manufactured or distributed. The absence of reliable manufacturing records and identifiable markings therefore continue to hamper efforts to identify illegal production centres and dismantle domestic arms trafficking networks.[59] Consequently, the marking and record-keeping requirements introduced under the Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 have little impact on firearms manufactured entirely outside the legal regulatory framework.

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[59] S K Jain, B P Singh and R.P. Singh, "Indian homemade firearm – A technical review", *Forensic Science International*, 144 (1), August 11, 2004, pp. 11–18.

Diversion of Weapons from Government Stockpiles and Security Forces

Although India maintains strict controls over firearms held by the armed forces, Central Armed Police Forces and state police organisations, instances of theft, looting and unauthorised diversion continue to occur. During the Maoist insurgency, attacks on police stations, armouries and security force convoys were frequently undertaken not only to inflict casualties but also to seize firearms and ammunition. Over the years, Maoist groups captured hundreds of INSAS rifles, self-loading rifles (SLRs), AK-series rifles, carbines and large quantities of ammunition during raids on police armouries and ambushes on security personnel, significantly enhancing their operational capabilities.[60] More recently, the ethnic violence in Manipur in 2023 exposed another dimension of this challenge when more than 6,000 firearms and several lakh rounds of ammunition were looted from police armouries and subsequently circulated among armed groups.[61] In addition, isolated cases involving the unauthorised sale or diversion of service weapons by security personnel demonstrate that insider threats can also contribute to the illicit circulation of firearms. These incidents underline the importance of strengthening armoury security, improving inventory

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[60] Rajaram Satapathy, "PW extremists loot Koraput armoury; three killed", *The Times of India*, Bhubaneshwar, February 7, 2004, at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/482997.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. PTI, "Nayagarh attack: Cops recover huge quantity of looted arms", *The Times of India,* Bhubaneswar, February 18, 2008, at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/nayagarh-attack-cops-recover-huge-quantity-of-looted-arms/articleshow/2792594.cms. "Maoist Ashutosh reveals Nayagarh arms loot details", *The New Indian Express*, Rourkela, May 16, 2012, at https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2009/Mar/05/maoist-ashutosh-reveals-nayagarh-arms-loot-details-30508.html.

[61] Bikash Singh, "Unidentified armed men loot weapons & ammunition from Manipur rifles outpost in Thoubal", *The Economic Times*, Imphal, February 9, 2025, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/unidentified-armed-men-loot-weapons-ammunition-from-manipur-rifles-outpost-in-thoubal/articleshow/118093406.cms?from=mdr.

management, conducting regular audits and ensuring the prompt recovery of stolen weapons to prevent government-owned firearms from entering illicit markets.

Transnational Nature of SALW Trafficking

Finally, the transnational nature of illicit arms trafficking means that effective national measures must be complemented by sustained regional and international cooperation. Differences in legal frameworks, varying enforcement capacities and continuing instability in neighbouring countries often provide opportunities for traffickers to exploit jurisdictional gaps. Continued cooperation in intelligence sharing, joint border management, capacity building and implementation of international tracing standards will, therefore, remain essential for disrupting transnational trafficking networks and preventing the diversion of firearms to terrorists, insurgents and organised criminal groups.

Overall, India's legal framework and institutional response to the proliferation of SALW have become considerably stronger over the past two decades. Nevertheless, evolving trafficking techniques, porous borders, the convergence of organised crime and terrorism, illegal domestic manufacture and the need for greater institutional coordination continue to pose significant challenges.

Conclusion

The proliferation of illicit SALW continues to pose a significant challenge to India's internal security. The analysis has shown that the illicit supply of these weapons is sustained through a combination of cross-border trafficking, illegal domestic manufacturing and diversion from authorised stockpiles, supported by resilient trafficking networks that have adapted to changing political, technological and security environments. These interconnected networks have enabled insurgent groups, terrorist organisations, organised criminal syndicates and other violent actors to acquire and replenish weapons despite sustained enforcement efforts. Consequently, the challenge of illicit SALW extends beyond policing and law enforcement, affecting national security, governance, economic development and long-term social stability. Understanding the sources of these weapons and the mechanisms through which they are procured and circulated is, therefore, essential to effectively address their proliferation in India.

The analysis established that cross-border trafficking has historically been the principal source of military-grade weapons entering India, although diversion from authorised stockpiles and illegal domestic manufacturing have also emerged as significant sources. In Northeast India, the earliest supply of modern weapons originated through external assistance from Pakistan and China before evolving into sophisticated transnational trafficking networks spanning Southeast Asia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India's Northeast. The decline of Cambodia and Thailand as major grey arms markets was accompanied by the emergence of Chinese-manufactured weapons as the dominant source of illicit firearms entering the region through Yunnan and Myanmar. Ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar, including the KIA, KNU and the UWSA, became key suppliers and facilitators of these networks, while insurgent organisations, such as the NSCN-IM and the ULFA, transformed from end-users into regional arms brokers supplying weapons to other militant groups in the region. Despite the weakening

and dissolution of several insurgent organisations, recent recoveries of sophisticated foreign-origin weapons during the Manipur conflict demonstrate that these trafficking networks remain active and continue to exploit porous borders, difficult terrain, ethnic linkages and the continuing instability in Myanmar.

The analysis further demonstrated that the patterns of arms trafficking in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir evolved under a different geopolitical setting. Unlike Northeast India, where weapons primarily originated from Southeast Asian and Chinese trafficking networks, militant organisations in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir benefited from Pakistan's covert support and the extensive stockpiles generated by the Soviet-Afghan War. The Afghan jihad transformed Pakistan into a major repository and redistribution centre for illicit weapons, while the diversion of externally supplied arms and the growth of frontier arms bazaars such as Darra Adam Khel created an abundant supply of military-grade firearms. These weapons, facilitated by Pakistan's intelligence establishment and transnational smuggling networks, significantly enhanced the operational capability of Sikh militant groups in Punjab and later militant organisations in Jammu and Kashmir.

While cross-border trafficking remains the principal source of military-grade weapons, illegal domestic manufacturing centres such as Munger in Bihar and Umarti in Madhya Pradesh continue to produce sophisticated firearms for illicit markets, with traffickers increasingly using encrypted messaging platforms and social media to facilitate their sale. The analysis also showed that diversion of weapons from authorised stockpiles through theft, pilferage and unauthorised sale by serving security personnel has emerged as another important source of illicit firearms. The manufacture of improvised weapons during the 2023 Manipur conflict further demonstrated how local production can supplement the illicit supply of firearms during periods of prolonged violence.

The proliferation of illicit SALW has had significant implications for India's internal security by sustaining insurgency, terrorism, left-wing extremism, organised crime and communal violence. While political, ethnic, ideological and socio-economic grievances provided the underlying motivations for these movements, the availability of firearms

enabled them to sustain armed campaigns, enhance their operational capabilities and inflict greater casualties. The experiences of Northeast India, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and the Maoist-affected regions demonstrate that access to weapons was a critical factor influencing the intensity and duration of violence. In the case of left-wing extremism, the steady availability of firearms enabled Maoist groups to expand their area of influence, mount coordinated attacks against security forces and sustain the insurgency over an extended period, contributing to the sharp rise in fatalities during its peak years. Similarly, the widespread availability of sophisticated weapons during the 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur transformed localised ethnic tensions into prolonged and highly lethal armed confrontations. Although levels of insurgent violence have declined in several regions, the continued circulation of illicit weapons indicates that their impact extends beyond the life cycle of insurgencies, posing an enduring threat to public order, communal harmony and long-term peace.

The analysis also shows that although India has established a comprehensive legal framework through the Arms Act, 1959, the Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019, the Arms Rules, 2016, the Customs Act, 1962, the BNS, 2023, the BNSS, 2023, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and the PMLA, 2002, legislation alone cannot effectively curb illicit arms proliferation. Recognising this, the Government of India has complemented legal measures with extensive administrative and operational initiatives, including strengthening border fencing and surveillance, enhancing intelligence sharing and inter-agency coordination, disrupting illegal domestic manufacturing units, improving firearm marking and tracing systems and expanding cooperation with neighbouring countries to dismantle transnational trafficking networks. These measures have contributed significantly to reducing insurgent violence and intercepting illicit arms. However, the adaptability of trafficking networks, the emergence of new smuggling techniques such as drone-based deliveries, continuing instability in neighbouring countries and the persistence of illegal domestic manufacturing indicate that the challenge remains dynamic and requires sustained national and regional cooperation.

The analysis highlights that while India has made significant progress in strengthening its legal, institutional and operational response to illicit

SALW proliferation, evolving trafficking methods and emerging security challenges necessitate further policy interventions. The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen India's efforts to curb the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

First, the ongoing deployment of technology-enabled border management measures, including smart fencing, anti-drone systems, ground sensors and integrated surveillance networks, should be expedited, particularly along the India–Myanmar border where porous terrain and continuing instability in Myanmar have increased the vulnerability to arms trafficking. These measures should be complemented by better manpower deployment, enhanced intelligence sharing, and real-time monitoring to improve interdiction of illicit arms. At the same time, the local population should be educated and suitably sensitised about the dangers of the easy availability of small arms. They should also be incentivised to assist the law-enforcement agencies and security forces in combating the menace of smuggling of SALW. Furthermore, intelligence sharing, joint investigations and coordinated border management with neighbouring countries, particularly Myanmar and Bangladesh, should be strengthened to disrupt transnational trafficking networks and improve firearms tracing.

Second, the ongoing enforcement measures against illegal firearm manufacturing, including periodic raids and the dismantling of production and distribution networks, should be sustained and strengthened. However, law-enforcement measures alone are unlikely to eliminate long-established manufacturing hubs such as Munger in Bihar and the Sikligar workshops in Umarti, where gunsmithing has traditionally been a hereditary source of livelihood. Targeted economic rehabilitation programmes should, therefore, be introduced to facilitate the transition of skilled artisans into legal occupations, thereby addressing the socio-economic factors that sustain illicit firearm production.

Third, greater use of the asset-forfeiture provisions under the PMLA and the BNSS should be made to identify, freeze and confiscate the proceeds of arms trafficking. This should be supported by coordinated financial investigations involving the NIA, Enforcement Directorate, financial intelligence unit and state law-enforcement agencies to dismantle the financial networks sustaining illicit arms trafficking.

Last but not least, a comprehensive national small arms and light weapons strategy should be formulated to integrate border management, firearms tracing, stockpile security, intelligence sharing and international cooperation within a coordinated policy framework while addressing emerging challenges such as drone-enabled smuggling and online arms trafficking.

This monograph synthesises the diverse and often separately examined dimensions of India's small arms and light weapons problem. Existing studies have examined cross-border arms trafficking, the role of illicit weapons in insurgencies, domestic illegal firearms manufacture and the diversion of weapons from legal and state-controlled sources, often within particular regions or conflicts. This monograph brings these strands together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different sources of arms supply interact and reinforce one another. By examining historical patterns alongside recent developments, including the changing methods of cross-border smuggling, the proliferation of illicit firearms and continuing efforts to curb domestic manufacturing and diversion, the monograph connects developments that are often studied separately. Its contribution, therefore, is not simply the presentation of new individual cases, but the consolidation of dispersed evidence into an integrated account of the sources, circulation and security implications of illicit SALW in India. This synthesis also provides the basis for identifying common policy responses to a problem that is sustained through multiple and interconnected supply channels.

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