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NARCOTERRORISM IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War era birthed a discourse on security issues which were not centered around military action. Subsequently, the issue of non-traditional security threats has come to encompass varying problems, with terrorism being one that most people are best acquainted with. However, terrorism as a non-traditional security threat is not self-explanatory. Terrorism has many branches, some of them including state-sponsored terrorism, religious terrorism, or, in this case, narcoterrorism.

India is no stranger to facing an amalgamation of traditional and non-traditional security threats. From the series of wars fought with her neighbours on either side, to the shocking 26/11 attacks, India's security has been undermined by traditional and non-traditional security actors after its independence. However, there is a strain of terrorism that plagues North East India with considerable consequences on the socio-economic climate of the region. This paper attempts to break down the presence of narcoterrorism in North East India, and will highlight how non-traditional security threats create a vicious cycle wherein one threat creates another.

Understanding Narcoterrorism

To further understand why narcoterrorism is a catalyst for many other non-traditional security issues that take form in a society, it is crucial to know what “non-traditional” security itself means. Sreeparna Banerjee and Pratinashree Basu opine that non-traditional security threats are those that “have typically fallen outside the purview of discussions on more “immediate” threats to national security such as for instance, territorial encroachment”.¹ This also envelopes crises such as energy

¹ Banerjee, S. and Basu, P. (2022) “Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific,” *ORF Special Report No. 185*, Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/strengthening-partnerships-to-counter-non-traditional-security-threats-in-the-indo-pacific/>

security, and an array of issues that fall under human security, such as food and water shortages, human and drug trafficking, and more.

One of the most important characteristics of non-traditional security threats is that they are transnational in terms of their consequences and require “regional and multilateral cooperation.”² In terms of South Asia and South East Asia, some of the biggest non-traditional security threats include, but are not limited to, displacement, climate change, disasters causing lapses in health infrastructure, and drug trafficking.³

The concept of drug trafficking and its tryst with terrorism creates a very interesting nexus. The term “narcoterrorism” can be defined as “the participation of groups or associated individuals in taxing, providing security for, or otherwise aiding or abetting drug trafficking endeavours in an effort to further, or fund, terrorist activities”.⁴ It is to be considered that there are arguments that question the concept itself. To many, combining drug trafficking and terrorism results in no fruitful disambiguation of the term. This is because terrorism has usually been associated with “political violence”⁵, while drug trafficking and other organised crimes are seen from the lens of economic gain. Therefore, the hesitancy in welcoming narcoterrorism as a term remains valid.

That being said, India is one of the cases where there is a confluence of terrorism and drug trafficking; narcoterrorism in its essence is present in North East India. This is due to the region’s proximity to the “Golden Triangle”⁶, the opium-producing transborder region between Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. Coupled with insurgencies in North East India, the place serves as a case study

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bjornehed, E. (2004) “Narco-Terrorism: The Merger of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror”, *Global Crime Vol. 6, No. 3&4*, pp. 305–324. Retrieved from <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/drogue-terreur.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Goswami, N. (2014), “Drugs and the Golden Triangle: Renewed Concerns for Northeast India”, *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*. https://idsa.in/idsacomments/DrugsandtheGoldenTriangle_ngoswami_100214

for how narcoterrorism has taken shape in not only the western part of India, vis a vis the Golden Crescent, but in the eastern part as well.

Calculating the Golden Triangle's Presence in North East India

India's North East Region comprises eight states, namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. Connected to India only through the Siliguri Corridor, a 21 km geopolitical hotspot, the region remains isolated. The diverse ethnic communities, that form the various tribes of the region, are not limited to the Indian border. Ethnic kinship between India and neighbours such as Myanmar has resulted in socio-economic reliance. Mani Shankar Aiyar rightly said, "Whereas the western part of India can live with suspended economic activity with Pakistan, northeast India can never break off from its trap of backwardness without active cooperation of Burma or Myanmar."⁷ Due to the lack of connection with the rest of India, socially and physically, and the nature of the creation of the statehoods in North East, insurgency has become a recurring issue in the region. The aforementioned socio-economic reliance of the region has also added to the insurgency and separatist movements.

History of Opium Cultivation in the Region

The conflict history of the region has played a huge part in the development of the narcotics industry. Riddled with insurgency issues in the late 1940s, Burma had groups such as the Communist Party of Burma and the Mong Tai Army⁸ that had participated in the drug trafficking industry. Another primary group that benefited from the finances resulting from drug trafficking was the Kuomintang (KMT). After losing to Mao's Communist Party of China in 1949, the KMT

⁷ Bhatia, R. (2017). *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours*. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. P. 167

⁸ Felbab-Brown, V. (2015). Enabling War and Peace Drugs, Logs, Gems, and Wildlife in Thailand and Burma. *East Asia Policy Paper 7*. Brookings. P. 16. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/policy-paper-7-webv5-1.pdf>

was forced to retreat to Myanmar's Shan state where efforts were made to regroup and retaliate⁹. Funding of those finances came with partnering up with local warlords such as Olive Yang to create drug routes for smuggling.

Hence, one can say that the ties between insurgent groups and drug trafficking, or narcoterrorism itself, took shape around this time period. Opium cultivation was predominant in conflict-ridden areas due to its high return on investments and the low production costs made it a favourable crop to grow. As the illicit industry evolved, so did its routes of smuggling.

It is also key to note that the shift in production from the China-Myanmar border to the Myanmar-Thailand border was encouraged by the Chinese government.¹⁰ China's connection with the United Wa State Army (UWSA), an insurgent group in Myanmar, made it easier to relocate production amidst the ethnic conflicts that plagued the Shan state. Therefore, many people of the Wa ethnicity relocated. The reason behind China's doing was the severe repercussions of drug abuse seen in the Yunnan province in China, that shared borders with Myanmar. The UWSA remains one of the most active groups that benefit off opium production.

Today, Myanmar's position as the second largest producer of opium while being India's neighbour poses severe security challenges.

Drug Trafficking in North East and its Impact on Insurgency

India's open borders with Myanmar has made it very easy for insurgent groups to shift bases and capitalise on the flourishing drug trade in the region. Some routes utilised include one from Moreh

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Goswami, N. (2014), "Drugs and the Golden Triangle: Renewed Concerns for Northeast India", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*.
https://idsa.in/idsacomments/DrugsandtheGoldenTriangle_ngoswami_100214

in Manipur to Thamu in Myanmar. Furthermore, Assam too has become central to drug trafficking routes.¹¹

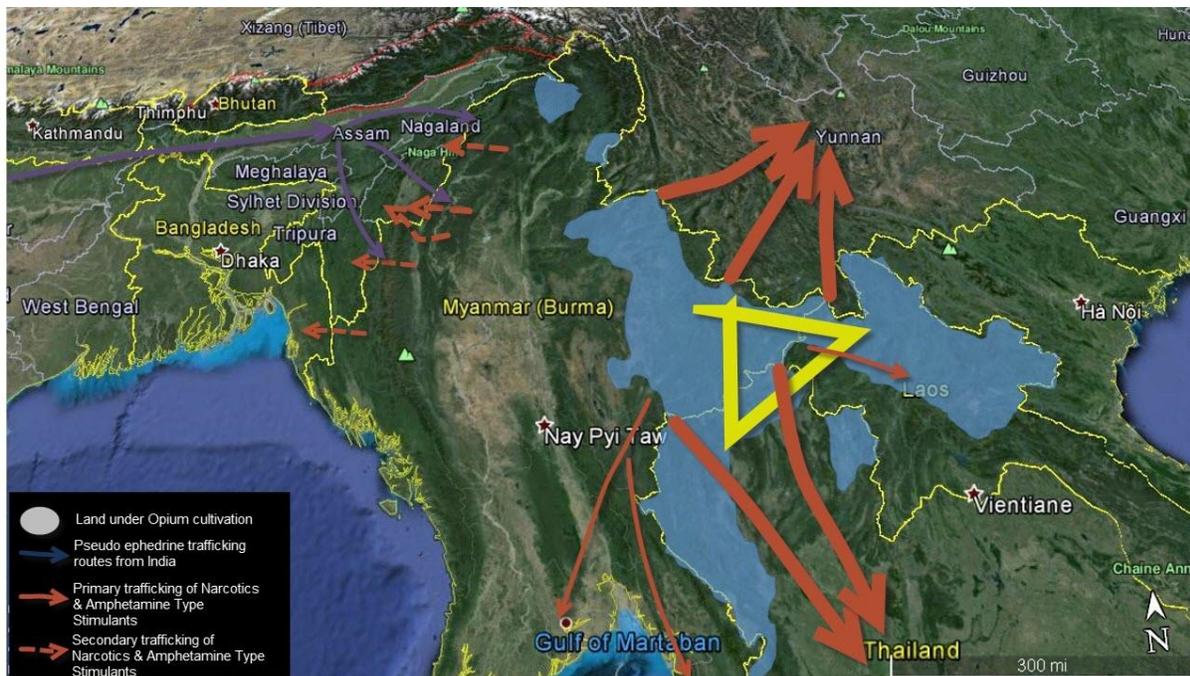


Figure 1: The Golden Triangle and the route to North East India (Source: Namrata Goswami)

As Figure 1 shows, most of the primary trafficking of narcotics and amphetamine-type stimulants, such as “meth”, is towards the Golden Triangle, i.e., Yunnan Province of China in the North and Vietnam, Thailand and Laos towards the south. From there on, black markets of countries such as Japan, and South Korea procure drugs. On the western front, most of the secondary trafficking of the aforementioned drugs happens through North East India, with routes into Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. Most of the routes going into Assam trickle in from the Nagaland-Manipur corridor.

¹¹ The Tribune. (2022, November 5). N-E insurgents helping peddlers spread narco-terrorism: Intel. Retrieved from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/n-e-insurgents-helping-peddlers-spread-narco-terrorism-intel-334485>

Moreover, the cultivation of opium is also predominant in Manipur and Mizoram; a corridor runs to the Golden Triangle to convert opium into heroin and then transport it back to India.¹² Tripura's cannabis produce is smuggled into the states of Uttar Pradesh, and into Nepal. Therefore, not only are drug cartels transborder, but India's own cultivation in North East has turned into a convenient economic advantage for insurgent groups.

Some primary insurgent groups that have been known to participate in drug trafficking include the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from Manipur, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), and the United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent).¹³ The Indian Army quoted ₹ 1,500 crores worth of drugs have been seized from Assam alone. The transborder operations of the aforementioned insurgent groups, which are perhaps the biggest groups to garner influence in the region, allowed them to smuggle drugs with little to no difficulty. Not only has narcoterrorism given insurgency a new lease of life, but has also catalysed corruption, with claims that members of the military, bureaucracy, and polity have been involved in the smuggling.

China and Pakistan have reportedly also been active members of the cartel. It is unsurprising that insurgent groups¹⁴, primarily the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, receive funding from abroad to bolster drug trafficking in the region. These fundings in turn allow the groups to pay drug lords in Myanmar and keep the symbiotic flow of drugs going. This poses a big challenge to the already vulnerable Sino-Indian relations as there have been multiple instances of information being passed on by the insurgents to Chinese intelligence agencies.¹⁵ Keeping in mind how China

¹² Sahu, A. (2022). Increased Drug Trade in Golden Triangle: Security Implications. *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*. Retrieved from https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/increased-drug-trade-in-golden-triangle-asahu-280722#footnote30_9ubjx3g

¹³ ANI. (2021, September 21). Northeast India-based terror groups, drug cartels clash on Myanmarese soil over narco funds; 3 PLA members killed. Retrieved from <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/northeast-india-based-terror-groups-drug-cartels-clash-on-myanmarese-soil-over-narco-funds-3-pla-members-killed20220921153908/>

¹⁴ The Tribune. (2022, November 5). N-E insurgents helping peddlers spread narco-terrorism: Intel. Retrieved from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/n-e-insurgents-helping-peddlers-spread-narco-terrorism-intel-334485>

¹⁵ Morris, L. (2011). Is China Backing Indian Insurgents? *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2011/03/is-china-backing-indian-insurgents/>

had implicitly given armed support to insurgent group the Communist Party of Burma back in its prime days of functioning, India must not rule out the possibility of China's involvement in the drugs and arms procurement of the NSCN.

Lastly, narcoterrorism in North East India just doesn't support the insurgent groups of the region, but also boosts finances for Naxalites. Anashwara Ashok writes about how the Naxalites "exploit the corridor for expanding their revenues and arms smuggling."¹⁶ Drug trafficking is the primary source of finance for insurgent groups which is used for the procurement of arms to counter military and police presence in vulnerable areas.

Despite the dichotomy of the term "narcoterrorism", it is cemented as one of the primary security challenges that India has been facing. Most of the insurgencies in North East India are political in nature, and involve issues pertaining to political values, autonomy and ethnicity. Combining this form of political violence with drug trafficking for funding has given the term narcoterrorism legitimacy.

Non-Traditional Security Threats Posed by Narcoterrorism in Northeast India

As discussed before, non-traditional security threats create more non-traditional security threats that dismantle socio-economical apparatuses that a society is based on. North East India's administrative workings and development projects have severely been hampered due to the present of insurgent groups and their banking on drug trafficking. It has also resulted in major health security concerns in the region.

¹⁶ Ashok, A. (2019). Golden Triangle: Challenges to India's National Security. *Indian Army*. Retrieved from <https://indianarmy.nic.in/writereaddata/CLAWS/Golden%20Triangle.htm>

In Numbers: Impact of Drug Consumption on North East India

The National Family Health Survey ¹⁷ shows that prevalence of substance use is higher in men from North East India, by a rate of 20%, in comparison with men from rest of India. India has, on record, 10.2 million substance users, out of which, the survey claims, the highest belong to Assam with a concerning 6.7 million. The social demographics also show an interesting correlation between drug consumption and identity markers in societies.

Table 1: Prevalence of substance use by sex in Northeast states, India.

Substance use	Northeast states						
	Arunachal Pradesh	Manipur	Meghalaya	Tripura	Nagaland	Sikkim	Mizoram
Smokeless tobacco							
Men	56.9	65.2	86.7	66.6	64.2	39.3	79.2
Women	33.7	51.7	87.2	65.8	34.5	23.6	77.4
Total	44.7	57.9	87.0	66.2	49.3	30.9	78.3
Smoke							
Men	41.8	50.4	52.3	32.2	35.1	23.4	63.4
Women	7.8	11.4	5.0	4.3	1.4	5.2	21.5
Total	24.1	29.4	23.6	17.8	18.3	13.7	41.8
Alcohol							
Men	65.4	46.7	34.4	26.8	40.0	45.3	32.6
Women	38.0	7.1	2.4	5.5	4.5	26.0	1.9
Total	51.0	25.4	15.0	15.8	22.2	35.1	16.8

Sources: Based on DLHS-4 (2012-13) states report.

Figure 2: Prevalence of substance abuse by sex in North East India. (Source: International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health)

Figure 2 highlights how, except the percentage of women who consume more smokeless tobacco in Meghalaya, men have higher chances of abusing smokeless tobacco, smoke, and alcohol. The

¹⁷ Saikia, N. and Debbarma, B. (2020). The socioeconomic correlates of substance use among male adults in Northeast India. *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health*, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 149-157. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213398418303403#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20substance%20use,India%3A%2029.51%25>.

age group that consumes the more substances is 25-34, which constitutes of 23.7% of the total population that consumes substances. This shows concerning trends of how most of the population that should be active in the labour force is at a higher risk of addiction. In terms of social strata, the data shows that the section of the population that identifies with scheduled tribes in North East India constitute 80.5% of the total population that consumes substances.¹⁸

This amplifies the challenges that societies across the states of North East India face; unemployment, social instability, and addiction have permeated social structures.

Health Security and Narcoterrorism

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare¹⁹ stated alarming disparity between the rate of HIV patients seen in North East India in comparison with the rest of the country.

Key indicators	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura
Adult HIV Prevalence (in %) in 2017	0.06	0.06	1.43	0.11	2.04	1.15	0.05	0.09

Source: As per "India HIV Estimation 2017"

Figure 3: Prevalence of patients with HIV/AIDS in North East India. (Source: India HIV Estimation 2017)

According to the MoU and subsequently Figure 3, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in North East India, specifically in Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland, is higher than the rest of India, which stands at 0.22%. This is because of consumers who use injections as their preferred medium of

¹⁸ Yadav, J., Singh, J., and Gautam, S. (2016). Correlates of substance use in Northeast States, India. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303711702_Correlates_of_substance_use_in_Northeast_States_India

¹⁹ Government of India. MoU for Partnership between North Eastern Council and NACO, MoH&FW. 2019. Retrieved from <https://naco.gov.in/sites/default/files/MoU%20signed%20between%20NACO%20and%20NEC.pdf>

consumption, also called Injecting Drug Users (IDUs). HIV/AIDS has seen a rise in the region due to increasing use of syringes that are HIV infected. The document also cites the porous borders between India and her neighbours which causes drug trafficking as a reason behind the rise of patients.

The lack of health infrastructure and accessibility to facilities due to inadequate land and air connectivity means that most patients do not receive medical treatment in time. Manipur has the highest mortality rate per 1,00,000 persons with a staggering 36.86%.²⁰ In fact, out of the top seven states with the highest mortality rate of HIV/AIDS patients, five are from North East India.

The vacuum created in societies across North East India due to factions of the population falling prey to substance abuse thrusts forward the cycle of social problems that insurgent groups use to legitimise their goals. The presence of insurgent groups, and ultimately, narcoterrorism, in the region has proved to be a big obstacle in solving the problem of provision of resources for HIV/AIDS patients. The “shut downs” organised by such groups results in clinics being inaccessible, and road blockages results in little to no provision of medical resources.²¹

Consequently, the demand for autonomy by many groups, citing ethnic differences and lack of economic opportunities can be circled back to the presence of drug trafficking in the region. Due to the vicious cycle that non-traditional security threats cause, it is impossible to differentiate narcoterrorism from its social consequences which has national level impacts.

²⁰ Wion. (2020, November 30). Spread of HIV/AIDS in Northeast India alarming: Report. Retrieved from <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/spread-of-hiv-aids-in-northeast-india-alarming-report-346480>

²¹ Koiremba, N. and Nunes, W. (2013). Drug Trafficking and Narco-Terrorism as Security Threats: A Study of India's North-East. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, p.77 Retrieved from [\(PDF\) Drug Trafficking and Narco-Terrorism as Security Threats: A Study of India's North-East \(researchgate.net\)](#)

Conclusion

As long as insurgent groups receive financial backing for their goals, the aforementioned problems will continue to persist. Narcoterrorism in North East India has exposed the security lapses of India, both in a traditional and non-traditional way. Insurgent groups have assimilated themselves into society, and have started to benefit from social institutions that work for the public good. An example of this includes how much of government funds for salaries are siphoned off to insurgent groups through coercion.²²

India has made some inroads into solving the issue. The primary solution comes in the form of more efficient cooperation between various bodies of the Indian Government and the Indian Army that helps in seizing of drugs. The Narcotics Control Bureau's active collaboration with the Border Security Force, and the Central Board for Excise and Customs to name a few has led to better results. India has utilised its partnerships with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to solve the issue. This means active involvement of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters and BIMSTEC's own sub-groups in the plight to solve the illicit drug trade in the region.

Narcoterrorism in India has intertwined itself with the problem of insurgency in the region. If India wants to effectively solve the developmental and social problems that North East India faces, and assimilate the region better into rest of India, it must uproot the issue of insurgent financing via drug-trafficking. With the presence of a military junta in Myanmar, it seems like a difficult path, considering that production has seemed to increase ever since the coup.²³

²² Ibid.

²³ Head, J. and Ng, K. (2023). Opium production in Myanmar surges to nine-year high. *BBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64409019>

There needs to be a holistic approach to solving the issue of narcoterrorism in North East India, which should not be limited to just military operations but rehabilitation of indoctrinated members of insurgent outfits, along with medical rehabilitation of addicts and proper treatment of HIV/AIDS patients. India must reconsider its open borders with Myanmar and the security issues it creates, but that may come at the expense of social retaliation to the deep ethnic links between communities on either side of the Indo-Myanmar borders, which will fuel insurgency even more. India must tread the path to erasing narcoterrorism carefully but must embark on it urgently.

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